

Sermon preached by Keith Clements, Tyndale Baptist Church September 19 2021

Gracious God, may what I say and what we all hear become, through the ministry of your Holy Spirit, your living word to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

'Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up. Go towards the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'" And Luke adds a little explanatory note: this is a wilderness road, a desert road. Philip must have been wondering what on earth was going on. Philip is one of those Greek speaking Jews who joined the followers of Jesus soon after the day of Pentecost and has showed himself evidently to be a powerful preacher and evangelist. And when another such disciple, Stephen, became the first Christian martyr and was stoned to death, Jerusalem became a very dangerous place for followers of Jesus. Philip and a number of others took themselves off elsewhere for safety.

Philip ended up in Samaria, the district to the north of Jerusalem. But though he was a refugee, he still was an evangelist. He drew crowds of Samaritans eager to hear his preaching. They turned to Jesus in droves, apparently. There were wonderful acts of healing. That's really another story. Enough to say that Philip's mission was such a success, that news of it reached the chief leaders of the church back in Jerusalem, the apostles Peter and John, and they went up to Samaria to see for themselves the astonishing results of Philip's mission. They went back to Jerusalem, rejoicing and encouraged in their own witness to the villages they passed through. So it must have been a great time, a great experience, for Philip. He must have thought he was the Billy Graham of Samaria, such a successful preacher drawing the crowds.

Then somehow or other he receives this message from God. Enough of this, get up and go down towards Gaza. Take the desert road. The desert road. There won't be many crowds there, will there? Sure enough, Philip finds himself there sitting by the lonely road in the heat of the sun. No sound to be heard, but the cicadas chirping, and the birds occasionally whistling. What has happened? Has this been a silly idea of himself, rather than God's message, to come down here? Where there's simply no one apparently to hear him. Or has God made a mistake? Was it really a messenger of God, an angel, who spoke to him?

Anyway, there he is sitting by himself in the middle of nowhere, and he hears a distant sound. The distant sound of wheels grinding along the dusty, stony road, getting closer, the noise getting louder. He sees just two people in the chariot that's approaching, the driver and his passenger. Philip is impelled somehow to go up and join the wanderers, the travellers, and sit beside them.

The rest of the story is indeed well known to us, has just been read to us, what happens. The spread of Christianity is easily talked about. It is indeed an extraordinary story of how a movement of followers of the Galilean Jew, cruelly and shamefully executed by the Romans, came to conquer the ancient world

In the third century, three hundred years after Jesus, the leaders of the church by then were amazed themselves at what had happened. They talked about the 'flood of Christianity', that took over the world. And today, a serious historian, Tom Holland, has written in his book 'Dominion' about how Christianity took on the world, and still amazingly influences the world for good. He describes it thus, although he's not himself a fully paid up Christian, by his own admission. He says it is 'the greatest story ever told', how this came about.

But though it's a great story, we mustn't overlook the way it includes little stories. A lot of it is made up of little stories, and of how was often those

little stories, that often triggered the big stories. Those little stories of small, low key, person to person encounters. One to one, face to face, heart to heart.

The New Testament itself makes this clear. In the Acts of the Apostles, (perhaps we had better call it the Acts of the Holy Spirit).

There's the great excitement of the day of Pentecost. Peter preaches to the great crowd. Amazed at hearing the Good News, everyone can hear in their own language. The birthday of the church, as we say. Three thousand baptised in one day. But then, not long after, there this rather different story, of Peter and John going up to the temple, as they did most days, to pray, and seeing a lame beggar at the gate, as he sat there day after day, year after year. People have thought nothing about it. But on this occasion, something happens between Peter and John and the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate. And we know the story about what happened after that, after they looked at each other and talked to each other. Something amazing happened. The man was given new life. And that triggered an almighty rumpus, and a great crowd gathered. And the apostles- well no publicity is bad publicity -found themselves in jail, but very famous.

Much of the later story in Acts is about what the apostle Paul does. Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the great missionary. The one-time persecutor of the church, becoming the great promoter of the church, bringing the Gospel all over much of what we now know as Europe.

But there is a crucial link in that story, that is often overlooked or forgotten. How Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle. One man was responsible, his name Ananias, was living in Damascus, where Paul arrived as a broken man having had a spell binding, life changing, vision on the road. Devastated, realised that he'd got it wrong, and now needed to begin all over again, in deciding what God wanted from him. And it is Ananias who is told by God: "Look, Saul of Tarsus is coming to you. I want you to receive him into your house." And Ananias said, "No no no, Lord, surely not, this man is the great enemy of the church". God says to him "No no no, you've got it wrong here, he's to be my chosen messenger to the gentiles, to all the world." And it is Ananias who receives Paul, despite his fears, and says "brother Saul", or Paul or whatever he was calling him at that time, "Come in! I've just put the kettle on, you're welcome here."

He was the crucial link. that made Saul the great apostle Paul. We hear hardly anything of him, do we, after that? I looked him up in the book of saints I have, there's so saint Ananias, there are no churches named after him, not at all. Yet he was the crucial link in this great story of the spread of Christianity. Why is there no Saint Ananias? I think we ought to write to Pope Francis and ask about this. Put it right. Yes, personal encounters are important, in the big story.

In John's gospel we heard another encounter, of course, again set in Samaria this time, of a hungry, tired, thirsty man asking a drink of a Samaritan woman. So it has been throughout the Christian story. Now those of us who are Baptists, and perhaps other too, have been brought up on the great words of William Carey. What are they? What did Carey say? Come on. "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." Yes. A lot depends on how we read them. I wonder did Carey remember his own words, all those long years, over ten years, after he had gone to India, and was working in Calcutta and Serampore. How many people did he reach with the Gospel? Well he spoke the gospel to many people. It was ten years, though, after he was translating the bible, making friends with

Indians, calling other people to share in the work, that one man turned to follow Christ, Krishna Pal.

In a few minutes we'll be singing a hymn I love, Elvet Lewis's hymn, 'Lord of light, whose name outshining all the stars and suns of space', with that great verse in which we pray "by the toil of lonely workers in some far outlying field; by the courage where the radiance of the cross is still revealed; by the victories of meekness, through reproach and suffering won. Father, as in highest heaven, so on earth your will be done." The Christian witness to God's kingdom, and the church grows, as much by the personal one on one contacts of friendship and help and prayer and love, as by mass events and campaigns, important though those can be.

And as we head out of lockdown, we are starting to realize just how much we have missed personal contact with one another, friends and strangers. Zoom has been a great blessing these past months, and I'm sure we shall continue to find it so. But we also need to remember that it is in the one to one meetings that take place, even the casual encounters, that God can use us as witnesses. Even the most apparently casual meeting in the streets, the simple courteous gesture, can produce results we can never imagine at the time.

During the late nineteen thirties, and in the nineteen forties, in South Africa, a young black boy was growing up in a township near Johannesburg. Like most black children and young people of his generation, thinking that the future held very little for him, that white people were strengthening their hold on the country, apartheid was beginning to be introduced. They really had no place in their own future.

But one day, this young man, this boy really, not quite in his teens, was out with his mother, shopping in the township, and the local white priest was coming by, they knew as Father Trevor. And he stopped and talked to his mother, and took off his hat, very politely, and addressed her. An astonishing gesture in that time and place, for a white man to address a black woman in this way. Maybe like the astonishing gesture for a Jewish man to ask a drink of a Samaritan woman would have been. But indeed it happened again and again. "Good morning Mrs Tutu", said Father Trevor. And young Desmond was impressed by this. Many years later, Desmond would be awarded the Nobel peace prize for his work in dismantling apartheid. But he always went back to that story, and said it was Father Trevor, Trevor Huddleston's simple act of welcome, greeting, respect, that made him realize, that there was another world possible. There were other types of white people. There was hope. Even apartheid might fall. We may never know the consequences even of the way we say hello to people. The Holy Spirit is in every moment of our meeting with others, preparing the way for small miracles to happen.

John Taylor was a great Anglican missionary in Uganda. later he took charge of the Church Mission Society, and after that was bishop of Winchester. He wrote a wonderful book which is still worth reading, called 'The go-between God: the Holy Spirit and the Christian mission'. The holy spirit, he says, is the go-between, who makes connections, links, relationships between us and other people, the world about us, and supremely between us and Jesus. In every encounter we have, where we are open to others, that Spirit is the one, even then, breathing through us and on us, creating the miracle of understanding, of listening and speaking and compassion, and which in turn can flower into unexpectedly great things from God, and things to be attempted for God.

Perhaps that's what Philip, sitting alone on the roadside in the wilderness, is

thinking about too. We know that beautiful story so well, the chariot with the Ethiopian official reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. And, he wants to know, what, why, is this story all about? And Philip takes the trouble, and indeed the courage, to sit beside a stranger, and say "Well let's begin at the beginning." After he is baptized Philip disappears, the Ethiopian sees him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. Philip goes back to his work as an evangelist in the coastal towns of Palestine. But he must have wondered, I expect, what was that diversion into the desert, to meet just one traveller from distant Ethiopia. What was that all about? Was it really necessary? What great work came from that? Well, that's a puzzle isn't it? The story is told in such detail, but we're not told of any great mass movements that resulted from it. Perhaps that's the reason why it is in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. That people needed to be told, even in the early church, that even encounters which don't produce great results, apparently, are still important, because each person matters to God.

It was a long while after, that the church of Ethiopia, as we know it today, was founded. It is one of those ancient, surviving, churches today. But I'm sure Ethiopians today see significance in that encounter between Philip and their ancestor. Ethiopia, of course, in modern times, is a country that has been riven by invasion, war, and famine and still is today. But the church is still there, amid it all, and there the spirit still moves, sometimes still in small ways.

Just one story about it. In about 1950, an Armenian Christian woman, living in Addis Ababa, the capital Ethiopia, was doing her shopping in the capital there. While walking home, she dropped some of her groceries. A boy rushed to her to pick up the groceries, before they were spoilt. She was very grateful and asked the boy who he was, and where he was from. His name was Asfaw Yemiru. He was from a Christian home many miles away from Addis Ababa, but now living as a street kid, homeless, in that city. Anyway, she took him into her household, and gave him a domestic job as a house boy, with her, doing her chores. She encouraged him to enrol at a school, which he went to, and then he got a scholarship to go to a senior school. And while he was at that school, he thought about other boys and girls who didn't have any opportunity of education. So he said to some of his friends: "Let us start a school, even while we are students ourselves". And they started an unofficial school. The classroom consisted of a shady tree to teach under in the evening. And from this grew, eventually, the Asra Hawariat School, of which he became head, and over the years educated some hundred and twenty thousand impoverished children. So from that, from one boy, who apparently was homeless then, and was sleeping in the cemetery in Addis Ababa, grew a mighty, strong, educational movement. Like Desmond Tutu, he received a prize at world level. He received in Sweden, the World Children's prize for the rights of the child in 2001. He died in May, this year. Thousands of his former students turned out for his funeral. Another great story, which began with a dropped shopping bag, a boy's kindness, and the woman who saw in him something special and possibilities.

It is again and again the pattern: the Peter and John and the lame man's story, the Ananias and Saul story, the Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch story, and so on. The William Carey and Kishna Pal story, the Trevor Huddleston and Mrs Tutu story, the Jesus and the Samaritan woman by the well story. Now we might say, well, what stories have we got round here to inspire us about this. Well, they're still being written, aren't they. They're going to be written by you and me as we move further out of lockdown, as we generate the opportunities for meeting together, and meeting with other people. We are going to be part of the greatest story ever told, of the Gospel changing the world. And it doesn't mean necessarily great plans and campaigns and organisation. Often we think of God as

calling us to do only the great things, the things beyond us, and that demoralises us if we think about them too much. The real danger we have to face, is not being daunted by the tasks that we think are beyond us, but by ignoring the tasks that we think are beneath us, the ordinary tasks, the meeting, the sharing, the caring, the befriending. The greatest story ever told, of the Gospel changing the world, takes to itself even our most everyday encounters, with friend and stranger. Let us just believe, like Philip, that the spirit is with us in those encounters. Pray that God will take and use them as God wills, and bring from them, whether we know it or not at the time, fruit for His kingdom. Amen