

Acts 8:26-40 Sermon for 9.15am and 11am on 3rd July 2016 – Explaining the Good News

In today's reading from Acts, there has just been a religious and politically charged event which kicked off a huge persecution of a religious minority, resulting in a scattering of this minority in all directions. There are people who are travelling around rooting out followers, inciting hatred against them, depriving them of their freedom and approving of their deaths. There are feelings of suddenly becoming unwelcome in a place the believers called home. There are fears that they too could be imprisoned, killed or deported, simply because they weren't part of the established order with the accepted cultural and religious identity. And it doesn't matter really whether this persecution was carried out by all of the people in Jerusalem or just a few religious zealots, the feeling of oppression is there.

We are living in the aftermath of a sea-change in our country's political life. Whatever we voted, remain or leave, there are now people who are hurting. They may feel oppressed, unwelcome, possibly even fearful of far right extremist aggression. There are others who perhaps feel like this huge political change has left them feeling under-represented and not listened to. And there are others who will be feeling victimised and vilified unfairly by a group who have not necessarily taken the time to understand their motivations. And whatever side of the debate, whatever angle you come at it, the future looks uncertain, rocky and difficult.

I've been tasked with talking about explaining the Good News of Christianity and it feels like a tough job at the moment. It's easy to talk about God's goodness when the world is rosy. It's easy to feel secure in God when we don't feel in a perilous predicament. It's easy to appeal to our friends from a position of strength, but harder when we perhaps all feel like we are in difficult waters.

We are used to the Church being a bit side-lined in today's culture like a slightly eccentric elderly uncle who we have to remember at Easter and Christmas but otherwise is fairly absent and certainly irrelevant to our day to day lives. But what do we do when our culture and our security begin to break down around us? What do we do when our leaders scatter as seems to have happened? Let me just point out briefly that at the beginning of our reading the Apostles, those who had been closest to Jesus, didn't scatter when everyone else did. Maybe we must now support each other as Christians as we seek to bring Jesus into the void which has been created around us. Maybe now, more than ever, now we need to hear the Good News of Jesus. Maybe now, more than ever, we need to be willing to stand up and be counted by proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom. So maybe now, more than ever, it is right to be thinking about what this Good News is and how it relates to our country which is fearful, angry, divided.

And so we consider Philip. Philip who was scattered to Samaria but who was not quieted by the pressure and hatred around him. Philip who may have felt like he had lost his home, his security and maybe his friends, but for whom there was nothing for it than to proclaim Jesus as God's Saviour for the people there too. Philip, who by his words and actions and by the grace of God brought joy to a whole city in Samaria.

And maybe Philip felt a bit like us – a bit small, a bit impotent, a bit scared and a bit confused. Maybe in his darker moments he had feeling of anger and hatred towards the people who oppressed him. Maybe he felt like he had just stepped off a cliff and was now in free-fall with nothing to catch him. But Philip's response to this was, as we'll see, to follow God's leading, wherever, whatever and to whoever.

And so we find Philip in Samaria and in verse 26, an angel of God gives him an instruction. A bit of a crazy instruction too – go and hang out on a desert road. But he obeys and bumps into an important official from a faraway land who was on his way home from Jerusalem. In verse 29, we have Philip again listening to God as he follows the instruction to go to the chariot of this important official and stick to it. And so we find that in Philip’s story, it’s actually not about him – it’s about God. Philip isn’t engaging in tactical voting where he’s pressuring the leadership in order to bring about religious toleration. Neither is he on some sort of self-defined religious crusade. Instead, Philip is being a servant of God and going wherever God tells him to go. Speaking to whoever God puts in his way. Only by obeying God does Philip hear the man reading his scroll, and only by hearing that, is Philip able to initiate a conversation with him.

It’s OK for Philip, we might say, he heard from God direct – that’s never happened to me! I want to say that for me at least, I’m rarely listening for God’s leading. Often, and especially this last week, I’m too busy with my own thoughts and my own opinions, my own plans and my own plots. I’m too busy identifying who I think is a “listener” and who isn’t, who I think is worth the time and effort and who isn’t. Maybe I don’t hear because I’m too busy with the noise of my own self. Maybe I need to make time to listen to God. Maybe I need to get into the mindset of actually walking with God at my side continually rather than using God as a map that I take out and consult only when I get lost!

Now, before anyone thinks I’m saying we just sit around as Christians on a desert road, or in a deserted old building, and let the world go by waiting for an angel, let me also note that Philip did initiate the conversation. He spent time listening to the official, he sat with him and travelled with him awhile, and he sought to help him with his questions. So Philip is definitely not passive. Instead, he is a partner with God, following where God leads, but also pursuing all that God puts in front of him. Similarly, we can fall into the trap, especially at the moment of sitting and waiting for a clear message from God, waiting for a miracle which, especially at the moment, for different ones of us will look quite, quite different. Instead, just as Philip is actively seeks to bring God’s light into the darkness around him, so must we. We are called to it. We are commanded to do it.

Philip isn’t seeking to convert the official to Christianity for political ends or for his own agenda, but because Philip was faithful to God and convinced about God’s Good News. We need to get over ourselves that our faith needs to be a private affair because somehow we are offending people by sharing it. As we’ve discovered this week, there are many, many more offensive things that can be said than sharing the deepest and brightest part of me with one of my friends. We seem to be concerned that somehow our sharing God’s Good News will be oppressive or offensive or in some way damage our relationships. We end up frozen into keeping that which should be spilling out joyfully and spontaneously, instead, locked up in a box. Having read a lot of social media this week and spoken to a lot of people about the referendum, two things strike me: one, that, as a society, when we really care and are caught up with our feeling and convictions, we actually do share them freely with other people even when they are controversial; and two, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, offensive about God’s Good News when you compare it to the darkness of the slugging, name-calling, stereotyping, sniping, backbiting, and over-simplification that has been happening across our country. Sharing our faith isn’t a crusade or a political, economic or institutional tool – it’s bringing God’s light into a dark place. It’s bringing God’s love into a place where it isn’t. And it’s bringing God’s will into the light so people can see it and evaluate it for themselves.

Back to Philip, you might have noticed, there’s a certain amount of in-tuneness with God that he displays which we touched on earlier, and also a certain amount of understanding that he has which he uses to enable him to help the official’s understanding and lead him to Jesus. A number of us have been reading “The Story” over the last few weeks. I’ve heard a lot of feedback about it, good

and bad. Some of us have liked what we've read and some have perhaps seen a side of Jesus which is different from our expectations. However, I hope that all of us have come to know God better through it. There's no quick fix for a relationship with God. We must be faithful disciples, faithful followers, faithful students at the feet of Jesus. This is why Philip could help the official; and yes, I know that some of you might respond that we are told that God will give us the words to speak when we need them, but that isn't an excuse for not following and learning about the God that we worship.

So Philip explains the Good News to the official and he is baptised and then suddenly Philip is off, following where God's spirit leads again, and the story's over. But it's not all over for us, and it's not all over for Philip. Philip carries on spreading God's message wherever he goes. He just can't help himself. What do we do? Do we keep God's message tucked up inside waiting for an opportune moment? Do we know what we mean when we say the Good News of God?

When we talk about God's Good News, each of us will have a slightly different take on it. It's not a simple one dimensional thing. We each have a story to tell of what the Good News of Jesus - his life, his death and his being raised from the dead - will mean to us. We can all obtain forgiveness through faith in Jesus, and for some of us, that Good News will have more emotional resonance than for others, but it is true for all. Perhaps the Good News for some of us is that in Jesus we have found a leader worth following. Perhaps, the Good News is that in Jesus we have discovered a way out of a feeling of entrapment, bondage or slavery, whether that's to some sort of addiction, or a way of living or thinking, or even freedom from the feeling of guilt. Perhaps the Good News is that through Jesus we have found that life has purpose beyond just going through the motions as we get older each day. Maybe the Good News is that in Jesus we find a model to make sense of the world we see around us; maybe the suffering we see is only made sense of by a God who gives himself to recreate and restore, a God who in some way gives worth to the otherwise meaningless violence of humanity and nature. Or maybe the Good News is like Philip explained to the official, that God, in Jesus, chose the route of suffering rather than military conquest, crusade, monarchy, or even democracy, to change the world. Maybe this is the Good News, that Jesus suffered for others rather than oppress them. He came for us as a lamb, not a lion, so that we are not coerced into a journey of faith in God, but rather we are invited to follow Jesus' example and give ourselves for the world around us too.

The Good News of Jesus is all this and more, and we all have a story to tell. Even if we haven't committed ourselves to Jesus fully yet, if we really think about it, those Christmas's and Easters, those big life events – good and bad – and those times where we have felt a prompting from somewhere, mean we also are part of this story and the Good News is ours to be a part of, carry and tell too, if we choose to.

However, I want to end by saying that Philip explained the Good News of Jesus in the context he was given – the official reading from the prophet, Isaiah, following the prompting of God and in a time of oppression, persecution, hatred and fear. Our context may be similar in some ways to Philip's in the ways I've already described, and the Good News for all of us is that there is a firmer foundation than all we set our security on in modern Western Europe. The other day I was climbing at Almscliffe on the way to Harrogate and quite unusually for me, I slipped and fell – not a lovely experience I have to say! But when I opened my eyes, my world had turned upside down – literally. There I was dangling from a rope, halfway up a cliff the wrong way up. I hadn't hit the ground because of the metal gear I'd wedged into a rock crevice just a few seconds earlier. Before my fall though, my trust had been all in my hands and feet, but when my hand slipped and I plunged headfirst towards the ground, bouncing off the cliff on my way, it was the little bit of metal in the rock which saved me. When my

world turned upside down at high speed, the saving grace, as it were, was my attachment to the rock.

In the last week, many of us will have seen our world turned upside down and felt like we are plummeting. Like my hands and feet, the things we have placed our trust in, have become very slippery, as values have been knocked off pensions, jobs have become insecure, futures have become uncertain. In this context, perhaps the Good News of Jesus is that when our worlds turn upside down, God is our refuge. We don't have to chase after the next level of security and we don't have to live in a leadership void. Instead we have a God who is our rock, and who will lead and guide us, like he did to Philip, if we listen.

What I didn't tell you about my fall was that when I opened my eyes and saw my world turned upside down, I also opened my eyes on an amazing (albeit inverted) sunset, and perhaps I only appreciated it fully because of the strangeness of seeing it upside down, but there certainly was something I'll never forget about seeing my world afresh, having been stripped of all my securities except for my attachment to the rock which had saved me. I pray that as we trust God in these uncertain times, and in fact tell others about God, people who may be uncertain and confused having had their worlds inverted too, that we will see afresh the joy of the Good News of Jesus and we will follow his promptings wherever we end up. Amen.