

Easter 5 Year B 2021

We celebrated the Feast of St Philip - at least, those of us who do such things, we celebrated the Feast of St Philip yesterday. Not that we know when he was born or when he died - simply that the first church we know of dedicated in his name was consecrated on that day in Rome in the year 560.

Philip is a saint worthy of our attention. In fact, I like to think that this story from the Acts of the Apostles is more about Philip than it is about the Ethiopian Eunuch (although we must not forget him, as the ancient Christian Church of Ethiopia, still bearing fruit today, probably stems from this encounter).

Let us look at what we are told. Here is Philip, one of the twelve, and therefore an orthodox Jew. His orthodox faith has already been challenged by his relationship with Jesus. He is the third of the Apostles to be called. He brings his friend Nathaniel to the Lord. Jesus describes Nathaniel as 'an Israelite in whom there is no deceit' - or 'an Israelite without guile' - in direct comparison of course with Jacob, the son of Isaac, who was given the name Israel (you can find the story in the Book Genesis). He was full of deceit.

On one occasion Philip questions the possibility of feeding five thousand men - not to mention the women and children - 'six months wages would not buy enough for each of them to get a little' he says. It

is interesting to note that John the Evangelist tells us that it was approaching the Sabbath at this point - a day not only of rest (marking God's rest after the six days of creation) but also a day when people celebrated their escape from slavery - and not one word of John is written as surplus to requirement. So here is a crowd again being offered liberty, and bread for the journey they are being invited to set out upon.

Just before the Last Supper - again in John's Gospel - it is Philip who tells Jesus that 'some Greeks' wish to speak with him - and Jesus replies 'The hour has now come for the Son of Man to be glorified'. It is just at this point in John's Gospel that Jesus realises that his hour has come, having told others before that his hour had not yet come.

And then at the Last Supper - again in John's Gospel - following Thomas's question 'We do not know where you are going - how can we know the way? - John tells us that Philip says 'Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied'. Jesus replies 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,' and that lead to what is called the farewell discourses - those long chapters of theological meditation towards the end of John's Gospel, set in the context of the Last Supper.

So, Philip is one of the twelve, he has been with Jesus from the start, he has walked with him, talked with him, debated with him, brought a boy with loaves and fishes to him, brought some Greeks to him - surely,

seen the miracles, heard the arguments, run away in fear, gathered with the others in the upper room, met the risen Jesus, and now, he encounters an angel and the angel sends him on a mission - **Go - get up and go** - towards the south. And there he meets someone.

I would like to suggest to you again that this is not simply a story about the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch, but that it is also a story about Philip - and people who are 'other'.

At the guidance of the angel Philip meets someone who is 'other'. He is a eunuch - an impossible concept to the Jews - how can you circumcise someone who has nothing to be circumcised?, so 'not one of us'. He could be a Jew, the Jews were an ethnic mixture at this time - or he could be a Gentile who has heard about and been attracted to, the God of Israel, so in Philip's eyes 'not one of us'. He is most probably dark-skinned - not one of us - he is a stranger - not one of us. 'Is there anything stopping me from being baptised?' he asks. Well, the standard answer might be 'Turn up on Tuesday evening for the next six weeks and I will teach you what you need to know and then I will baptise you'. How arrogant can you get? Everybody's experience of God is different. People come to God in all sorts of ways - in this case through a study of the prophecies of Isaiah about the suffering servant - and Philip's proclamation of Good News in Jesus. The Ethiopian could identify with the Suffering Servant - he had been shorn, he had been denied justice

and as Philip, like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, opens to him the scriptures, he recognises who Jesus is.

Then Philip plunges into the water with the Ethiopian - he (the Ethiopian) has decided to love Jesus, and that is enough for Philip - and in this act Philip is the one who grows in faith - he accepts - perhaps with a struggle - as Peter had had to struggle (remember his vision of the sail cloth lowered from heaven, and the command to kill and eat all sorts of unclean animals?) - Philip had to accept - embrace even, that this man who was other, this Gentile, this person of other race and definitely of other sexuality, this deviant - was being called by God to follow his Son. It was an eye opening, mind opening moment.

This story isn't just about the Ethiopian; it is primarily about Philip and his capacity to embrace 'the other'. Last Sunday we heard 'I have other sheep who are not of this flock' - and this story is about these words being lived out in practice.

You could say that this was Philip being pruned. This experience - this encounter with the totally other - helps him to grow in the mutual love that has been commanded of the disciples. Jesus has told them 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' - and they had no idea where that would lead them. The angel's command to Philip to get up and go took him places he would not have dreamed of; it is part of the sending. And Philip is pruned, stripped of all sorts of ancient prejudices - so that he can bring forth much fruit - from Azatus to Caesarea, that is along the

Mediterranean coast through the land that belonged to the Philistines and through the chief cities of the Samaria. And when he got to Caesarea he settled and raised a family (Acts 21.8). And it was there that he met that other follower of Jesus who had been severely pruned so that he could bring forth much fruit - the Apostle Paul. The flock which followed the Good Shepherd was beginning to look very different to what the disciples had originally thought it would be like - a sect of Judaism. There was to be a lot of pruning - and a lot of new fruit.