

Easter 5 2018 Acts 8: 26-40 The right place at the right time?

The Sundays of the Easter season feature readings from the Acts of the Apostles that recount incidents from the earliest days of the Christian community. Today's epistle from the Acts of the Apostles tells of the occasion when Philip, the deacon, found himself in the right place at the right time.

The story in Acts does not speak in terms of the right time or the right place. Instead, it relates that an angel of the Lord told Philip to go to the wilderness road that leads to Gaza. When this happened, Philip may not have understood that an angel was prompting him. He may only have recognized the heavenly intervention for what it was only sometime after it happened.

Many of us have experiences like this and we find ourselves going off in some direction or another, perhaps for ordinary or uncertain reasons. Then something significant happens- a meeting, a conversation or an impact on us from somebody else. These ordinary incidents become extraordinary and so we realise that we were in the right place at the right time.

But what happens to Philip? He sees a splendid chariot making slow progress along the dusty road. He is led to approach the chariot and later he attributes this to God's direction.

One man stands driving the chariot and another man, very finely and strangely dressed, sits and reads from a scroll. He reads out loud, and Philip recognizes these words which come from Isaiah the prophet. Not knowing this man from Adam, Philip dares to ask him a question, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The man with the scroll replies, "How can I unless someone explains them to me?" He motions to his driver to stop the chariot and invites Philip to take a seat beside him and as the chariot rolls on they engage in, what must be one of the earliest recorded bible studies!

The man with the scroll turns out to be the treasurer of Ethiopia, a very important and influential man. He has travelled a long way to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel and, interestingly there is still a very large black Jewish community in Ethiopia. Eager to know still more about Israel's God, he is reading the Isaiah scroll on the journey home, but he is left wondering about a mysterious suffering figure that the author writes about. Is the prophet describing himself or someone else? It is here that Philip arrives on the scene.

Philip tells him that the mysterious suffering figure is Jesus, who was recently crucified outside Jerusalem and three days later was raised to life. The Ethiopian welcomes all that Philip tells him of the good news and as they pass by a river, the Ethiopian—we are not told his name—asks to be baptized. Philip does this and immediately afterwards is snatched up by the Spirit and taken away, leaving behind this new Christian who continues home, rejoicing.

Philip finds himself in the right place at the right time to help the Ethiopian take a decisive step to faith in Christ. It may be the most important encounter the Ethiopian ever has, yet it is brief, as Philip disappears, his task accomplished.

We may find ourselves in the same situation as Philip. We are led at some time, to some place, to someone who needs to hear a word from us. Our message may be one of explanation, witness, support or encouragement. Though it may be expressed in very personal terms, the message does not belong to us because what we say is God's word spoken through us. The one who hears it may take a decisive step in life. That person recognizes and responds to the good news that comes from God.

We may find ourselves in Philip's situation today, tomorrow, or the next day. We are taken to the right place, the right time, to the right person in order to make a difference and even though we may not describe it in these terms, we may be speaking some words given to us by God.

The Lord works in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform and we must be available and unafraid. What is required is not extraordinary knowledge or eloquence- Moses had a stutter so God gave him Aaron as his spokesman- or we may not consider that we have a great depth of spirituality. We must simply speak the truth as we know it in our lives, bear witness to Christ as we know him because that is what it means to share our faith.

The right place, the right time, the right person—these come along often enough if we make ourselves available.

I was very aware last Thursday, in our Hall as we launched our first Befriending Coffee morning that we were in the right place at the right time when between 60-70 people came along. This was the response to our Vision programme with our objective of reaching out to the elderly and lonely in our society. As I sat at the latest of our Lunch Time concerts last Monday, I felt that it was happening in the right place at the right time- another one of our Vision objectives.

Both the Lunch Time concert and the Befriending Coffee morning helped us to begin to meet another of our Vision objectives of making St Mary's better known in our community and the wider world as we share our distinctive worship and theology and our welcome and love for the Risen Christ whom we seek to serve.

As I plan the first of our preparation sessions as we begin to prepare a group of at least seven young people to be admitted to Holy Communion prior to Confirmation, I have the feeling that we are in the right place at the right time. That first session will be a talked through Holy Eucharist as we begin to explain the faith to these young people in the same way that Philip explained the faith to the stranger from Ethiopia.

As we start the process of dismantling the United Benefice and look to the future perhaps God is telling us that we are in the right place and the right time to progress as two separate parishes, transforming church and transforming lives, as the Spirit calls us by expressing the mission of the church in our own valid but different ways.

What happened to Philip the deacon happens to all of us at some time or another. We find ourselves—unexpectedly—in some place and time that is strange to us. It is strange and unexpected, but the time and place are right for us, a situation into which God has led us. We must respond in faith.

The world is—literally—dying for good news. We find ourselves in the right time and the right place to respond, to make a difference like Philip's Ethiopian, who heard the good news in the right place at the right time and then went on his way rejoicing.

The right place and the right time. However, let us not forget one very important point- things happen in God's time not our time.

Amen.