

SERMON FOR PATRONAL EUCHARIST, COLLEGE OF ST PHILIP THE DEACON, OCTOBER 2021

Philip and the Ethiopian

*Our ordination declarations tell us Deacons are called to work with the Bishop and the priests with whom they serve as **heralds of Christ's kingdom.***

And Philip the Deacon is our inspiration. Philip was well-known as a highly effective herald of the gospel, one of the original seven called out by the whole church and ordained by the apostles. He was Greek-speaking, had a home in Caesarea, a leading Greek city.

How does Philip enter the story at this stage in the book of Acts?

Acts 21 (snippet)

³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

1. Philip: ready to change

One of the things that strikes me about this episode, is that God through Philip has inaugurated a brilliantly successful ministry in Samaria. He was a rock evangelist, with a huge following. A new Christian community is birthed.

How does Philip build on this runaway 'success'? (as we might think of it). I don't know what his plans were, but here are God's plans for him:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'

This is the last thing we might expect. Leave all the excitement, all the success, all the joy, all the fragility of a new church. Can you imagine – with crowds of people becoming Christians

– there must have been a million things to do. But God’s angel says – just leave it, and go to the desert.

This really challenges our understanding of success.

God is asking Philip to leave the success story, move on to something new. We might not have a mighty success story to tell, but it is **part of the deacon’s call, to be ready to move, ready to change**, ready to go at God’s command. The Church of England Ministry Team is calling this ‘diaconal agility’:

It’s another aspect of our diaconal freedom. We’re not tied down to doing things the same way all the time. If God wants to do a new thing, then it is part of our charism to be aware, ready, eager, available to change course and to move on.

2. Philip: not knowing, but doing

The narrative then tells us about the chariot, who is in it, where he lives, what he does for a living, the fact that he’s a proselyte to Judaism, an educated man who can read. (typical Luke – forensic detail!) But Philip doesn’t know any of that in advance. He’s working blind - he is simply told by the Spirit ‘Go up to that chariot and stay near it’. So Philip runs to catch up with a moving chariot – and it’s only then that he hears the eunuch reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah.

God doesn’t always explain things to us in advance. If we are deacons, heralds and messengers, we not only have to be ready to change course, **we also have to accept that we won’t always get the explanation in advance**. It’s about sheer, unvarnished obedience, being ready to obey God without always understanding why. It’s not always easy to do! We can only do it by faith – and Philip is our deacon forerunner and inspiration, who reminds us of how important this faithful obedience is in God’s economy.

3. Philip: starting where people are

Philip then asks the eunuch, ‘do you understand what you’re reading?’ He doesn’t launch in with the four spiritual laws, or an invitation to church, or a pre-determined way of working. No. **He starts where the person is. And this is deeply diaconal**. We are the ones called to be with people where they are, listening to them, being willing to learn from them about where they are, without bringing our own preconceptions. Deacon Rita Bullworthy talks about going to where people are, not where we might like them to be.

The church often tries to do it the other way around. Come to church, we say. Be a good member of the congregation. Know when to stand up and when to sit down. Get used to singing hymns with an organ. Understand every word of these long prayers. And people

can't do it. The church is a strange subculture to them. It's alien. It's weird. They don't know where to start. They are even afraid sometimes of going into the church building. I've seen people walking up and down outside the church door, chainsmoking, afraid to go into the building.

That's where we deacons need to start, with listening and respect. It's the key to building relationships of trust, and trust paves the way for the gospel.

The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip waits for the man to ask him the question he wants to know. Philip doesn't put words into his mouth. He doesn't assume he knows what the question is going to be. He waits, until the eunuch articulates what's most on his heart.

I think this diaconal principle is particularly helpful for deacons whose ministry is in the workplace. It's that listening, and that waiting, which is so important in giving us the opportunities God wants us to have with people. It's only as we listen, attentively, without preconception, that we learn what is really on a person's mind: and attentive listening can not only be very healing for people, it can also create a pathway for the Holy Spirit to use.

Philip: knowing the Scripture

Philip's **knowledge of Scripture** is foundational to this story. Magee - He can hear what the man is reading, knows instantly where it's from, and is immediately able to explain. Knowing the Bible is, of course, not just knowing about the Bible. It's a lifelong challenge, to spend time with God's Word, prayerfully immersing ourselves in it, making it an essential part of who we are, how we think, how we make decisions, allowing it to form our attitudes. Soaking ourselves in Scripture is important for every Christian, but for deacons, people on the front line of ministry, tasked with creating those stepping stones between the worshipping community and those who don't yet know God's love, it's especially important.

Philip: bringing to baptism

The eunuch is very excited by all that Philip is telling him. He believes at once, and within a few hours they reach water. 'What's to stop me being baptised?' he asks Philip.

I don't know if you've ever baptised anyone within a few hours of their coming to faith in Christ! - **but preparing people for baptism is part of the diaconal calling.** If we've built relationships of trust in the community, if we've listened, if we've been able to meet people where they are, and explore with them the questions they are asking, then that is how

deacons prepare the way for people to come to faith. So as a result, people in the community may well ask you for baptism, simply because they know you.

A note of caution: the eunuch went on his way rejoicing, but these days, with so little knowledge of the Christian faith in our society, we need to do more than just rejoice. Follow-up after baptisms, weddings and funerals is crucial. After baptisms, we may well find that people don't want to know. They've had their baby done, and that's it.

The church is responsible for creating ways that make it easier for people to learn about the Christian faith. Maybe it's a stay and play, or family-friendly worship: a course to learn about faith: Messy Church, and Vintage Messy Church. We had our first Messy Vintage during our week of mission recently, and a woman of 93 made a first-time commitment to Christ.

There needs to be a forum to ask questions (we once started a group in a pub called Ale and Argument): parenting courses: rewilding the church. The church must seek to be the servant of Christ in the community, meeting needs wherever they can be met. **And we, as deacons, are called to enable the church to learn how to be Christ the Servant in our communities.** The whole church is called to *diakonia*: we are the ones tasked with helping intentionally to make that happen.

Because we are out in the community, listening and open and prayerful, we're called to spot what God's doing, where he is, how he's working. Where's God's kingdom happening? When we begin to see it, then that feeds in to our being heralds of Christ's kingdom. Which brings us full circle to where we started, called to be heralds of the Kingdom.