**Sunday 2nd May 2021**

Psalm 22: 25-31

Act 8: 26-40

Although our readings today are not from 1 John, the letter the apostle John wrote to churches under his care – we are continuing the theme of that letter.

Scripture will overlap with other areas of the bible and it is good to link those themes together to help us gain all round understanding.

We have heard in Psalm 22 the psalmist vowing to continue to praise the Lord, especially when deliverance comes – the life after the one on earth. His vision of a worldwide community, from all stations of life – the poor, the rich, from all the ends of the earth and through all generations. The throng of worshipers, with the only thing in common is loving God.

This ties in with the love that John has been speaking in his letter. The love that we have for God.

But we are not yet in heaven. We still have life on earth to complete. So if we look at the reading of Acts 8 it should help us to see how having love for God will help us to show His love to those who surround us. The command that we have been reminded in 1 John, to love each other as He loves us.

In the reading we hear about Philip. Philip was introduced earlier in Acts in chapter 6. We are told how the number of disciples were increasing and some Greeks had complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. The apostles decided to pass the responsibility of the practical overlooking of this to seven others. Philip was one of them.

We know that John wrote his letter to believers to shed light on false teachings that were becoming prevalent at that time. John wrote that we are given the Spirit of truth to help us weigh up whether those we hear are false teachers, or whether they were true teachers of God’s character. That one of the fundamental truths to be accepted and taught was (and is) that Jesus is the divine, incarnate Son of God.

When Philip was chosen, the believers – or the church – were instructed by the apostles to choose people to take responsibility for the food distribution who were “full of the Spirit and wisdom”. How do you evaluate that someone is full of the Holy Spirit?

Is it purely by the manifestation of supernatural phenomena? Such as prophecy, speaking in tongues or other magical signs? The bible tells us that this is not the way – even in chapter 8 of Acts that we are concentrating on: We are told of Simon the Sorcerer, who had amazed the people for a long time, believing that he was a great divine power. He would have made that claim, that he was either God himself or His representative. So signs are not enough on their own.

Perhaps it is the fact that someone speaks of Jesus as God? But all spirits acknowledge that Jesus is God. An example is found in Mark 5 when Jesus is approached by a demon possessed man and the spirit cries “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? So talk is not enough either.

Only the Holy Spirit knows the true identity of Jesus AND glorifies Him. If we know God, if we abide in Him and allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, then we will hear things in a different way to those who don’t. We may hear prophecy or news that sounds good, but we will have our own experience and knowledge of God and His character so that we can weigh things up in unison with the Holy Spirit’s leading.

The listeners have an equal responsibility as the person speaking to discern whether the person is a genuine follower of Jesus; to ensure that the person does not simply talk the talk and perform magical signs, but that they walk the walk – act in accordance with God’s commands to love everyone.

Philip was chosen as one of the seven to take responsibility of the food distribution by the church, who together would have tested and discerned that he was full of the Holy Spirit. If Philip was full of the Holy Spirit it implies that he would have known Jesus as the incarnate, divine son of God, that he tried to live his life in accordance with God’s laws (given to promote the community vision that God has for those living on earth) and because he loved God, wanted to show that love to others too. All the criteria that John has been emphasizing in his letter.

Although Philip was chosen to fulfil the responsibility for the early church in Jerusalem, his name is Greek, and with the fact that it was the Greek community who had been grumbling it would make sense that they appointed other Greeks to be part of the solution to promote fairness. Again, although not explicit, it is implied. So already we are seeing part of the vision that we read in Psalm 22 – Philip a Greek distributing fairly to others who were following and worshiping God, through Jesus His Son, comprised of Hebrews and Greeks mentioned in Acts 6 – beginning of all the ends of the earth.

Saul then arrived on the scene and the church scattered. Philip went to Samaria, only about 35 miles from Jerusalem, and began to proclaim Christ there, building up a large following – not for himself but for Jesus. Then God gave him a particular job.

The Lord sent an angel to tell Philip to go to a road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. It does not give any distance – but back towards Jerusalem. Philip was obedient. It does not say whether he asked any questions, just that he set out to do what the angel had told him.

It was while he was on his way to the destination that the angel had explained he should go that he met the Ethiopian. The Spirit told Philip “Go to that chariot and stay near it”. It sounds so very easy, as though everything that happened was obvious. How did Philip discern what the Holy Spirit was prompting him to do? It would not have been an outside voice as that is described as the voice of God. It was not an angel as they are introduced as angels. Simply the Spirit told him. Especially as Philip was in the process of following instruction given by an angel, he must have been very sure that what he heard was of God, from His Spirit.

The only way to know the voice of the Spirit is to be in fellowship with Him, to be in communication and know His promptings. That will come from testing these promptings. When we were trying to pin the tail on the donkey, we knew each other’s voices. We know that we would want each other to succeed – we have a relationship with each other and working towards one purpose. If someone different had joined us, a voice we did not know, and they began to tell us to move the other way, we would doubt it and follow those whom we have experience of knowing are for us.

Philip would have known the Spirit’s prompting on this occasion because he would have been nurturing his relationship over the preceding years. Jesus said “my sheep will know my voice”.

Philip followed the instruction to stay near the chariot. Whilst doing so he overheard the Ethiopian reading scripture.

The Ethiopian was a Gentile who feared God. He was an important royal official – Candace is the traditional title of the queen mother, performing duties for the reigning king.

The Ethiopian had a heart to know God, he was hungry to know more. God sent Philip TO him. It says that the Ethiopian had been to Jerusalem to worship – but God sent someone TO him.

As he had been reading the OT scripture in Isaiah, Philip overheard him. This is not a divine act, or signifies anything particularly amazing – reading out loud was customary. What was amazing is the act that Philip approached him when confronted with that opportunity. Again, he did not wait for the Ethiopian to say “this is difficult to understand” – Philip took the opportunity to simply ask “Do you understand what you are reading”.

Would it have been easy for this man to ask someone to explain things? He was a royal official – a man of power with responsibility for the treasury. If he asked for help, would he be showing some kind of weakness, that a man in his position should already know the answers? If he did not understand would it appear as though he did not possess the intellect required to perform his job? I do not have the answer, just more questions that arise as I read these snippets of scripture.

God sent Philip to where the Ethiopian was, asked him the question of understanding in a quiet place – he offered his help, did not immediately begin preaching.

When his invitation was accepted, he began to explain the scripture from where the Ethiopian had begun to read and expanded from there to share the good news of Jesus.

This is the model for our evangelism. To be open to take opportunities when they appear, to offer an invitation and if accepted to expand to begin at a point that someone is familiar with – not try to shoehorn our agenda into a conversation. Start at the point where someone is at.

Don’t forget that Philip was still on his way to where the angel had sent him. He must have been assured in his Spirit that this opportunity was the purpose of his travelling. He did not simply stop, sit and share – rather he made himself vulnerable, got into the carriage and continued with the official towards Ethiopia.

Philip showed his love by giving his time, his knowledge and his trust to the official – but ultimately placing his trust in God’s plan.

I do firmly believe that the Holy Spirit will lead us, He will help to illuminate the bible scriptures to us – but I think it can be enhanced with teaching from people too, based on biblical foundation and in unison with the Spirit – as long as we equally trust in the Spirit to discern what we are hearing.

Once Philip had shed light on the Isaiah scripture to the Ethiopian, expanding to the truth of the gospel, that Jesus is the Son of God, the Ethiopian requested to be baptized.

To get to this point the Holy Spirit was active. If the Holy Spirit was absent then Philip would simply be sharing, and the Ethiopian only hearing, objective historical facts. As I say, if we allow the Holy Spirit to dwell within us we will hear things in a different way to those who do not welcome the Holy Spirit and instead choose to dwell in what the earthly world has to offer. It is the Spirit that provides the subjective inward experience of the truth – it is the Holy Spirit who gives the ability to confess Jesus as the Son of God AND enable us to love, because the Holy Spirit is witness to God.

I am sure that during his ministry, Philip had people who rejected what he shared. His message would have been the truth, but without the activity of the Holy Spirit it is simply head knowledge being gained, we need the Holy Spirit to compel assent and agreement to the truth. So do not be disheartened if people have rejected your words when you have taken an opportunity to share the word.

The whole purpose for Philip to share the gospel was for the salvation of the Ethiopian. Philip was already assured of a relationship with God, we have been told of his faithfulness to God, to his being filled with the Holy Spirit. He did not have to earn anything else. He was assured of that eternal life with his heavenly Father – just as we are.

Philip acted because of his love for God. He was assured of the love he had already received from God, that Jesus died and was raised to life, as the divine Son of God, so that Philip received salvation. It was because of his relationship with God that he was willing to tell the truth to others, to show people a love that was of God. He did not discriminate between who deserved to hear it - he just took any opportunity that arose.

Once the Ethiopian was baptized, God took Philip away. We hear no more of the Ethiopian, other than even when Philip disappeared, he continued to rejoice. This implies that Philip had expanded on the good news of Jesus and the faithfulness, forgiveness, grace, truth and love of God. He had not made it about himself, otherwise when he disappeared the Ethiopian would have floundered. Instead, he continued rejoicing.

We are told that Philip appeared at Azotus and traveled about preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. We are told nothing more about Philip until later in Acts 21:8 where it is written “we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven”. This would have been around 20 years later.

Philip had been called to various places and ministries: From Greece to Jerusalem, to Gaza, to Azotus and the other towns until reaching Caesarea, where he stayed for at least 20 years.

How good are we at determining our seasons to be in particular places? Listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit? This is not a trick question at all, and for personal prayer. As lockdown restrictions begin to ease, our church needs to have a roadmap too, for ways to be in place where we are available to hear people, to be able to offer invitations where we may be able to help meet their needs. To be in a position to be available to show the love of God – not for our salvation to be earned, not because we HAVE to follow God’s law out of religious correctness – but because we WANT to show His love to others, because He loved us, and them, first. To help others hear and understand the faithfulness, forgiveness, grace, truth and love that God has for them.

We must examine carefully what we are being called to do, what we are able to do – and equally what we are NOT able to do. Sometimes there are seasons for things – and sometimes there is a long-term settlement – like Philip travelling from place to place, and then settling in Caesarea.

Please continue to pray for our vision – honestly and realistically. As we weigh up what has already been shared, I need to know what people feel they are capable of offering. We are all that bit older than when we entered the lockdown era – and our bodies will have changed.

Please do let me know what season you may be being called into. Perhaps you are willing and able to be involved in cooking, food preparation – or perhaps you were and now feel that this is something that you need to relinquish. Are you feeling called to be involved with people, willing to offer conversations and build relationships, but not able to do many activities? I really do need to hear from everyone not just what you would like to see happen, but also what you will be able to realistically offer.

And whatever you are able to offer is valuable. God has a plan for this church, but He also has a purpose for each one of us here. If you desire this church to show God’s blessings, and to be a blessing in the community, then you have a voice and a purpose. We need to be united in discerning the Spirit’s prompting in how this is going to be in practice.