

Philip the Deacon

10 5 09

Almighty God,
grant that, as by your grace going before us
you put into our minds all good desires
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect.

My text this morning may be found in today's passage from Acts 8 v38, 'Both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water and Philip baptised him.'

Our church is dedicated to an apostle with two names: in the synoptic gospels he's called Bartholomew; in John's gospel, Nathanael. The solution, as I'm sure you know, is Bartholomew was probably his surname, the son of Ptolemy while Nathanael was his given name at his circumcision. One connection which links the two different names is Philip, Bartholomew's friend and fellow apostle, whose name appears next to his friend in four of the five lists found in the Bible of the disciples' names.

But just when you think you are on safe ground when it comes to who's who in the Bible, we come across today's passage in Acts which sets out at length the exploits of Philip whom we might reasonably assume to be Bartholomew's friend, Philip. Not so! It is much more likely the Philip referred to here is none other

than Philip the deacon whose appointment along with that of Stephen the protomartyr is recorded at the beginning of Acts chapter 6. The church was having money problems. Surprisingly not lack of money but lack of equity in its distribution to those in need: her widows and orphans. The apostles didn't want to be distracted from their spiritual work by a preoccupation with material things – I know the feeling! So the appointment of seven deacons was most welcome and they were very good at their jobs. Things go so well that Stephen is targeted by Jewish opposition and became the first Christian martyr if you don't count Jesus himself, that is. Stephen's story is that of chapter seven and now in eight we focus on the successful ministry of Philip the deacon, not Philip the Apostles whose saint's day coincidentally was 1st May.

Before this morning passage, Philip had been spreading the gospel successfully throughout Samaria but it is not until the arrival of the Apostles, Peter and John, that the believers themselves are gifted with the Holy Spirit. Then we come to today's passage in which Philip is directed by an angel to the road running down from Jerusalem to Gaza where he encounters a state official of the Candace, Queen of Ethiopia. This unnamed eunuch, in charge of her treasury, seems to be a God-fearing man, possibly a proselyte, who, having journeyed to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, is now seated in his chariot reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The problem here is though he can read the Hebrew words, he cannot understand their meaning. So he invites Philip to join him to explain the text to him which Philip promptly does. The result is the eunuch's request for baptism and today's text: 'Both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water and Philip baptised him.'

I want to ask three simple questions of the text: how; who; and why?

How did Philip come to be on the Gaza road? He was directed. He heard the voice of God speaking to him through an angel and he responded. How God speaks to us can be many and varied. It might be through reading the Bible, through prayer, through worship, in silence. But we believe that God can and does speak directly to us by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. What is special here is that Philip is both listening and prepared to act on what he hears.

Who? Who is the man that Philip converts? He is a eunuch. The loss of his manhood was the price presumably he paid to be an official in the Ethiopian court. However in the Torah, in Deuteronomy 23 v1, it states that a eunuch could not be a full member of the congregation: loss of manhood meant loss of status. In converting him, Philip is reflecting the more liberal, welcoming attitude found in Isaiah 56 just three chapters on from the portion of scripture the eunuch is studying! Christianity, then, is a religion not just for the righteous but for everyone; all are welcome including those on the margins of society. So his lack of manhood was no barrier to his being accept as a child of God.

Why? Why was this conversion deemed important enough to record? It shows that the church, the body of believers is not restricted to one place, one time, one people. Ours is a church universal. It is truly catholic in the sense that it is world-wide.

What we have heard today is an account of the work of Philip the deacon in spreading the gospel of Christ. He does so because he listens to what God tells him and acts on it. The baptism of a eunuch is further evidence that the church is meant to be all-embracing. The spreading of our faith into Africa, to Ethiopia, is in fulfilment of Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nations thereby creating the church universal.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

10th May, 2009

H: Sermon 20:Philip the deacon

