

May 10, 2009

Our story today comes at a turning point in the story of Acts. Up until this point most of the action has been in Jerusalem and then, from the beginning of chapter 8, in Samaria. But now the gospel reaches further into the wider world. This has been made possible in part by the persecution which broke out after the killing of Stephen (chapter 7), and headed up by the young Saul. Chapter 9 will tell of the conversion of Saul, chapter 10 of the conversion of the gentile Cornelius and his family, and thereafter the story shifts to the ongoing expansion of "the Way" into the wider Graeco-Roman world.

But our concern today is just with the conversion of the Ethiopian. It is rather a strange story, even for the New Testament, and this is not least because of what is said to have happened. An angel directs Philip to a particular place, and then the Spirit tells him to trot along beside a chariot which happens to be passing by just then. The man driving the chariot happens to be reading from the book of Isaiah, which the trotting Philip recognises. They engage in a conversation which leads to the Ethiopian becoming a believer and being baptised (there, being as it happened, a puddle or something similar on hand for the purpose). Philip is then whisked away to some other place by the Spirit, and the new convert continues on his way, filled with joy but never to be heard from again.

There is more than enough in all of this for anyone to wonder about, whether they have a mind formed by modern scientific scepticism or, indeed, were one of the very first people to have heard the story. Almost nothing seems to happen "naturally"; everything seems to be either divinely directed or, at least, surprisingly coincidental. But if we allow the story to be itself, not worrying too much about what seems to be so unbelievable, there is another surprise which might be found here, but is rather less obvious. For all of the great effort of direction and coordination we are told God goes to in order to make all this come about, the outcome is just one new believer added to the many thousands who have already been added to the original small group of

Jesus' disciples. Up until this point the preaching of the disciples – and Peter and Philip in particular – has brought in great numbers of believers.¹ But here, in the midst of all that preaching success, we have the story of an extraordinary effort on God's part to secure just one more "soul".

Or it might seem a case of extraordinary overkill given the return, but only if we imagine that the other multitudes of conversions have all been easy, just because of the way they have been reported. But in fact, for all of the great numbers who have turned to Jesus in the Christian "revival" up until this point, each person may be considered to have undergone a movement to faith which has taken place as a result of something as marvellous and unbelievable as what happens for this passing charioteer.

It is easy to be dazzled by the apparent quick success of the apostles in their evangelism – or that of other more contemporary revivals. We might imagine it to be something like the effects of a successful advertising campaign for some product, or a new fad which sweeps through a section of the community: just get the formula right and they will come in droves! But to the extent that conversion to faith in Jesus is *truly* such a conversion, it is something as extraordinary and "orchestrated" as what takes place for the Ethiopian official. A person is placed for the giving of a word to ears which are hungry to hear, and faith arises. Whether only the one person, or a thousand people in one go – each person is acted upon by God in this same detailed way, according to their own history and so the way in which the gospel must work in them.

But, most importantly, this is the work of *God*. Luke is very careful, as he describes

¹ Three thousand are said haven been added to the number of believers on the day of Pentecost (2.41) and 5000 (more?) after Peter's preaching following the healing of the lame man (4.4). Great "crowds" also responded to Philip's wonder-working and preaching in Samaria (8.4-15).

the mission and growth of the new church, to place all that happens firmly in the context of the movement of the Spirit of God.² It is God who makes this happen; even if Peter and Philip and John and later Paul and Barnabas and many others besides are the well-honed instruments for the work at hand, it is God who applies them to the work.

The church is today, especially in such traditions as ours, much under a cloud as to its future, at least as far as we are able to guess at what our future might look like. This being the case, the temptation is strong to look wistfully at the stories of Acts and to wonder, "How did they do it?" And there is no shortage of resources which offer ways of making it all happen "in your congregation".

Now, there is much to be said for method and style. We know well-enough that the *wrong* style or approach to ministry can be disastrous in the life of a congregation and this is justification enough for us to suspect that, just because things are not falling apart dramatically in our place, we can't be confident that we've got the method and style right. "How might it best be done?" is a question we must be willing to ask and seek to answer. But it remains the case that, for all of the good work we might do, it is God who will make happen what *he* wants to happen even more than we do – the touching and changing of people's lives by the preaching of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

The question about whether or not our reading today makes sense or could have happened is neither here nor there; the greater challenge is believing that such an extraordinary rigmarole on God's part is indeed what it takes for us to come to faith.³ If we can believe this then we have heard good news, for if it is indeed such astonishing lengths which are required to bring even one person to faith, to graft even one person into the vine (to recall our gospel

² See, for example, Acts 1.5,8; 2.4; 4.8,31; 6.3; 7.55; etc.

³ As an aside we might note that within the story itself there is an indication of the extraordinary lengths God goes to in bringing us to life – in the account of the Suffering Servant, who is the subject of the Isaiah text the Ethiopian is reading when he is met by Philip.

reading), then the growth of the church can *only* be the work of God, and not our problem.

But, that being the case, we still have "work" to do—the work of prayer and attentiveness to the leading of God. This is not as easy as it might sound – either in the effort itself or in making the effort in the right spirit. It is not easy to pray for such a work of God, because this is a prayer which we must pray out of a heart longing for the well-being of those who are yet to come to faith. In a situation where churches are in numerical decline it is very easy to turn such prayer for other's faith into a prayer that this or that church not have to close its doors. When this happens, it is not the people we are concerned for but a form of the church – our form, as it happens. And we can find good reason to suspect that God is rather less concerned about that than we are.

It is also not easy to pray a prayer like this because, if we think about it, new people in any community make a difference to the community, and not only in way the community might like. The church is no different in this respect. We have no reason to believe, had he stayed in Jerusalem, that the newly converted Ethiopian official might not have made life for the apostles rather more difficult than easier. A prayer that God might do his work and heal the world is an invitation to God to jostle *the pray-er* more than a little as well.

And so, if we are to pray at all for such a touching of people's hearts as we see in these stories in Acts, we must pray *bravely*, and deal with the consequences of God's saying "yes". For, whatever God's Yes might cost us, it is surely better than imaging that we know better, and will do it our way, on our own terms.

May such courage be found in the hearts of all God's people, and they be moved to pray for themselves and all who need to hear God's word of life.

Then, as the psalmist declares, shall

All the ends of the earth ... remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
... worship before him. (Ps 22.27)
By the grace of God may it be so. Amen.