

Dorset South & West Circuit Written Service by Rev'd Peter Clark

Sunday May 2 2021 - 5th Sunday of Easter

Call to Worship

The Lord says, 'I am the vine, you are the branches.
Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit.
Apart from me you can do nothing.'
Come now, as branches of the vine, ready to bear fruit.
Come now, to worship.

Hymn 1 - Singing the Faith 295 - Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord

Refrain

*Alleluia, alleluia,
give thanks to the risen Lord,
Alleluia, alleluia,
give praise to his name.*

Jesus is Lord of all the earth,
he is the King of creation.

Refrain

Spread the good news o'er all the earth,
Jesus has died and has risen.

Refrain

We have been crucified with Christ,
now we shall live for ever.

Refrain

God has proclaimed the just reward:
new life for all! Alleluia!

Refrain

Come let us praise the living God,
joyfully sing to our Saviour.

Refrain

Donald Fishel. (1950-)

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Prayers of Approach

Loving God, just like the first disciples, we abide in your love – for you have sent your Spirit to us. Just like the early apostles, we have seen your glory in the person of your Son. So, we confess Jesus Christ as Lord, for we have known him in our lives and believe what he has shown us of your love. Amen.

Prayer of Preparation

Loving God, we confess the times when we did not abide in your love, when we strayed from the path of faith and ran after other gods. In your mercy, forgive us.

Loving God, we confess the times when we did not abide in your love, when we have been less than loving, and hurt those around us. In your mercy, forgive us.

Loving God, we confess those times when we did not abide in your love, when we have not held ourselves accountable to you and measured our worth by our own achievements. In your mercy, forgive us.

Make your love real to us once again, shape us, forgive us and remake us in your image. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Scripture Reading - Acts 8:26-40

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Sermon - Joining the Vine

So, the story so far ... The religious authorities of Judaism were becoming increasingly frustrated because these dastardly former followers of Jesus were going around preaching his Word, healing people miraculously and having the darn cheek to say that a man they and all Jerusalem knew was dead, was actually alive and even more powerful than he was before he died!

First they tried the 'softly softly' approach i.e. beat them up a bit, given them a bit of time in court and then tell them sternly not do it again. This worked about as well as trying to get rid of Jesus via crucifixion so they tried tougher tactics - what today might be called creating a 'hostile environment' - and we all know how well that works!

This escalated to the horrific killing of Stephen, effectively by a lynch mob, and is followed by a round of brutal persecution of followers of the New Way of Jesus. Instead of solving the problem it results in the spreading of these followers further afield - and no longer contained in Jerusalem!

And Philip is one such - chosen at the same time as Stephen was to be a Deacon - offering a serving, pastoral ministry to the Greek-speaking widows and effectively run the New Testament equivalent of the Foodbank. But things move on as folk who are initially called to first membership and then a certain level of service find themselves being led to a greater degree of involvement and later a further level of service. That is what happened to Stephen and that is also what has happened with Philip, who has become a sort of roving evangelist for the Christian movement - very similar to the original Methodist Ministers.

And in one of those dynamic 'now' moments, Philip finds himself driven by the Spirit to meet a eunuch from Ethiopia (which at that point in time included modern day Sudan). He holds a senior position in court there and is described in my resources as a 'pious God-seeker' - someone who has encountered Judaism and is drawn to its religion and its God, though as a Gentile and a Eunuch, he would have significant barriers to becoming a full member. Membership barriers eh? We'll come to that in a bit!

Nevertheless he is drawn (by the Spirit?) to explore and read the Scriptures and, I don't know about you but I have this obtuse vision of him standing a Ben Hur-Type chariot, belting down the road, occasionally whipping the horse and trying to read a scroll of Isaiah! But of course it wasn't at all like that! Perhaps some sort of wagon or crude carriage - but still not an ideal way of reading the Scriptures. And let's face it, Isaiah is not the easiest text to read in a comfy armchair!

Which brings me to the first of my three points today! **Scripture isn't easy.** Some read it simply and simplistically but believe me, the Bible is neither simple nor straightforward! It takes a fair bit of work and a good bit of study - and it is very, very hard to do that all on your own! When Philip, spotting that the eunuch is reading the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

It's one reason why Home Groups and Bible Study Groups are useful and is one reason that generally we in traditional church circles have a 'Sermon slot' - to explore, consider, study these sometimes deeply dense and at others wonderfully refreshing texts recorded in the Bible. It's called exegesis - pulling out the meanings from these ancient writings.

Which is what the eunuch is trying to do but, discovering that the (already ancient even then) writings are hard to interpret. How can he, unless someone guides him? How can any of us?

Which is where membership of a worshipping community comes in. It's why we gather. It's why we work together. It's why we've kept in contact in the midst of this pandemic. To try to understand the texts that reveal so much about the great God we are drawn to follow.

So Philip offers to help and guide and to impart his knowledge and understanding and the group experience of the early church. Which is my second point - that another point of being a member of a faith group is to **explore that faith together** and, what is more, to share it with each other and with those outside the church.

We're not here for coffee mornings ... for communion rotas ... or worships plans ... or even for Church Meetings, though they all have their place and we're all missing them desperately (apart from Church Meetings?) They are, though, vital parts of our running machinery and are great opportunities for evangelism and for telling the story of Jesus i.e. telling people about this amazing God who became human, died and, impossibly came back from the grave, conquering death forever. Telling people about that, is what we as Christians are all about. It is what we are called and instructed to do (cf Matthew 28:18:20!).

It's what Philip clearly thinks he is all about and he really gets stuck into explaining and expanding how the scriptures connect to the Christ - the Messiah of God - and sharing the Gospel - the Good News! Who knows how far they travelled in that wagon as Philip talked of a suffering servant who was slaughtered like a lamb, sacrificing himself on behalf of all humanity and turning the world upside down? But he got a response - and the eunuch is convinced and converted and convicted. He is **in**. He wants to join and be one with this amazing, dynamic group (the church) and this amazing, dynamic faith (Christianity) with, yes, an amazing and dynamic God!

And how do you join?

Well, I assume Philip must've told him about baptism and the eunuch is excited by this new covenantal sign to join the Christian way!

Wonderful! Exciting! And the eunuch wants to **do it now!**

Which is my third point - because Philip didn't say, "Well that's fine, but you will have to come to baptismal or membership classes for six evenings, sign up to the doctrines of the church and learn the Apostles' Creed by heart" Well obviously not the last bit because it hadn't been written but my point is he didn't give him any hoops and hurdles to navigate - he just accepted his desire to be joined into the church and be a Christian. He spied water right there ... and then and there Philip does the deed! My third point is that **Baptism is a free act of God's grace.**

Considering it is a desert region I don't suppose it is baptism by immersion - but a symbol is a symbol and water symbolises the washing away of the old self, the drowning and dying to your old ways, the waters of rebirth and symbolises the Holy Spirit cleansing and inspiring the new member with the power and presence of God! And engrafting the person being baptised into the true vine that is Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

Which is why I for one am incredibly happy to baptise more or less on request. I don't grill the person (or the parents of an infant) - I simply say, "This in essence is what we Christians believe in - and if you can with integrity make the promises in the liturgy, I will not refuse your request!" And in the service, the promises are made after the baptism itself - so even the gracious gift of water and the spirit and incorporation into the church universal is not made conditional on promises to mature into a good Christian! That, in essence is my theology of baptism, based very much on the story of Philip and the Eunuch.

An important part of that maturing process is becoming a member of the church local too, though, - finding the right place to do exactly what the eunuch did initially, i.e. seeking a greater understanding of the Scriptures, seeking to be a member of a worshipping community to deepen your faith and to seeking to understand the the ways of God - which is back to my first two points! We never hear what happened next to the Eunuch, or indeed to Philip after he then whizzed off to Caesarea but I just hope and pray that he found a worshipping community to settle in and

continued his journey of faith. In the same way I pray that those who come forward for baptism and are accepted and baptised do likewise. Amen

Hymn 2 - Rejoice & Sing 248 - This joyful Eastertide

This joyful Eastertide
away with sin and sorrow!
My Love, the Crucified,
has sprung to life this morrow.
*Had Christ, that once was slain,
ne'er burst his three-days' prison,
our faith had been in vain;*

but now is Christ arisen, arisen, arisen, arisen!
Death's flood has lost its chill,
since Jesus crossed the river;
lover of souls, from ill
my passing soul deliver.
Refrain

G. R. Woodward (1848-1934) altd.

Prayers

Creator God, you made us in your image and provide us with all we need: a world with plenty for all to share and delight in. For this we give you thanks and praise.

Saviour God, you came to forgive us our sins and to show us the path we should follow through the highs and lows of all that life throws at us. For this we give you thanks and praise.

Holy Spirit, you were sent to equip us for the task ahead and to get us into shape for the journey ahead, challenging us, pruning us and encouraging us. For this we give you thanks and praise. Amen.

So, to all those in need of love: let the love of God be known.

To a world in need of love: let the love of God be shown.

To those in need of food: let the love of God be shared.

By those in need of healing: let the love of God be experienced.

By those in need of peace: let the love of God be felt.

By those in need of hope: let the love of God be seen.

To those in need of joy: let the love of God be sung.

By those in need of justice: let the love of God be heard.

By all those in need of love: let the love of God be known. Amen.

Hymn 3 - Singing the Faith 312 - The head that once was crowned with thorns

1) The head that once was crowned with
thorns
is crowned with glory now:
a royal diadem adorns
the mighty victor's brow.

2) The highest place that heaven affords
is his, is his by right:
the King of kings, and Lord of lords,
and heaven's eternal light,

3) the joy of all who dwell above,
the joy of all below,
to whom he manifests his love,
and grants his name to know.

6) The cross he bore is life and health,
though shame and death to him;
his people's hope, his people's wealth,
their everlasting theme.

Thomas Kelly (1769-1855)

Blessing

Abide in God as God abides in you, then you will bear much fruit; for apart from God we can do nothing. Amen.