**DORSET SOUTH AND WEST CIRCUIT**

Service for Sunday July 5th 2020 by Chris Warren

Be still and know that I am God.

(Approach God and be quiet in the Lord’s Presence. Be still for one minute)

**Hymn: Be still and know that I am God**

Be still and know that I am God. X3

I am the Lord who saves and heals x3

In you, O Lord, I put my trust x3

Anonymous

**Prayers of praise and thanksgiving**

Yours Lord is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty. Everything in heaven and earth is yours, all things come from you and of your own we give you.

Lord God we thank you that you are with us every moment in all that we face, and especially during this time of challenge. Thank you for those who advise us how to keep well and for key workers who put themselves in potential risk to care.

Thank you that the situation is improving, more places are opening and for our area which is among the safest. We are grateful for our fellowship and for the care of the church in different ways.

We thank you that many people are seeking and for our response to them with the love of Jesus Christ.

**Amen**

**A prayer of confession**

Dear Lord, we are conscious of our failings. Forgive us if we have been so concerned for our own safety that we have failed to pray and think of those who are perhaps more vulnerable.

Forgive us if we have been critical of others when they have been trying to help us be safe in uncharted waters.

Forgive us for any lack of concern of those who are in much more dangerous situations than we are such as those living in refugee camps.

May we know we are forgiven though Jesus Christ.

**Amen**

**First reading: Matthew 11 vs. 16-19, 25-30 (NRSV)**

But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another ‘we played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating or drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man comes eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said ‘I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke up on you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light’.

 **Introduction**

A very warm welcome to our service together this morning. I wanted to say a special thank you to all who have worked so hard to keep us in touch and continuing to be church when we are not able to meet together physically. With three different options for worship we are reaching wider than normal. I heard somewhere that about 25% of the population have linked in some way with Christian sites. My prayer from the beginning has been that we all ‘keep the faith’ but it feels like God is doing much more!

In this period after Trinity Sunday I like to preach on Acts where there are such exciting events recorded following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Today I invite us to look at a part of chapter 8 which is about the Spirit’s leading and the spread of the faith to Africa.

Philip was a Deacon (not the apostle); one of the seven appointed to see the fair distribution to widows in the Jerusalem church. Like Steven he did not stick to the job description and was led by the Holy Spirit to evangelise.

**Second reading: Acts 8 vs. 26-40 (NRSV)**

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the South to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) 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, and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage he was reading was this:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before his shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news of Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘Look here is some water! What is to prevent me being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 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. 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.

**Reflection.**

Tom Wright tells an interesting story of when he was visiting Cambridge and he got the consistent thought to attend Choral Evensong at a collage he would not normally frequent. In the end he went and found himself in front of an American from Dallas who was visiting the U K unknown to Tom and had had the thought to contact him! This is a way in which the Spirit can work.

At the beginning of 1985 I was working for a battery firm in London. At Easter I sensed the Spirit prompting me to leave and work for the church. This was a real challenge to respond to. My role in the company was to manage technical work with a staff of about 20. In addition when I announced I was leaving a Ministry of Defence colleague wanted to recommend me to a competitive company for the post of Technical Director Designate. Another challenge! Further I found that getting a post in the church was not so easy. However, amazingly, my Superintendent minister approached me to work in the circuit team. My immediate reaction was, ‘A prophet is never appreciated in his own place’. However within 24 hours the Spirit had made it clear. June and I saw this as the right move. So followed six years of very fruitful Lay Worker ministry.

Celtic pilgrimage is about the Spirit’s call, journeying, being changed and moving on in risk and adventure.

So Philip is lead to go to the Jerusalem to Gaza road. It may be wilderness but was a very busy trade route. However, with God’s timing, he arrives to witness to an Ethiopian who is reading Isaiah chapter 53. This is the last of four ‘Suffering Servant’ passages. They seem to read more individualistic as they go along, and it is difficult to apply this one to the nation. I do recommend you read this chapter later and it is a real pointer to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Philip interprets the passage and the Ethiopian moves from being a God fearer in the Jewish faith to a Christian. He asks to be baptised which symbolises cleansing, a clean break with the past and union with Christ in new life. He then rejoices at this faith and travels on. He is known in Ethiopia as the founder of the church there.

Philip is lead on by the Spirit to Azotus and Caesarea, preaching in all the towns.

In Acts this event precedes Saul’s conversion and Peter’s preaching to Cornelius. It is therefore the first spreading of the gospel beyond the Jews. In effect it begins the Christian faith rather than it being a sect of Judaism.

The subject is very interesting. As a eunuch he was able to hold a top job in the Ethiopian court where the rulers were female. However, he would not have been acceptable as a Jewish convert. (He was like an adherent in that faith rather than a member).

It all seems rather quick, but the Ethiopian did not have long to decide and ‘instant’ conversions can happen! It is a reminder that we are to just follow the Spirit in sharing faith, not pick and chose who we think are more ‘acceptable’. We further see that the first non-Jewish convert recorded in the Bible was an African.

In a recent video service Peter Clark talked about ‘contact evangelism’. I found that really helpful because if we do not have contact we will not be able to share our faith. Further the URC Moderator, who preached in the video service on June 21st. reminded us of Jesus’ words about sharing a cup of water. That may not sound much but may sometimes be exactly what is needed.

Our Chaplains in Dorchester have just started to make contact again with people in businesses. We are effectively asking for permission to return. To date the response has been 100%. As we share this service today most of the remaining outlets will be able to open. This is contact evangelism and although sometimes it is a ‘cup of water’ sometimes it is being in the Philip place.

I am very pleased that we are seeking to open UCD for private prayer. This is not really in the Free Church tradition but is a response to the enquiring that is around. So we are able to offer rest, hope, new life. ‘Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest’ says Jesus in our gospel reading. We are able to offer the fullness of the Christian gospel to all who are seeking.

**Prayers of intercession**

Our Lord we pray for all on the front line during the current crisis**.** May they be protectedfrom corvid19.

We pray for the grip of this illness to be broken.

We remember all who are opening their doors again that their precautions will be effective and they will be able to trade.

We remember those nations where it is much harder to control the virus.

We pray for all minority groups in our nation who feel undervalued and may we listen and act.

Please guide us as we welcome new people to the church and reach out that we may live the love of the Lord Jesus. May our wisdom be vindicated by our deeds.

**Amen**

**Hymn: Crashing waters of creation (suggest we try tune ‘ All for Jesus’)**

Crashing waters of creation, ordered by the Spirit’s breath’

First to witness day’s beginning from the brightness of night’s death.

Parting water stood and trembled as the captives passed on through,

Washing off the chains of bondage- channel to a life made new.

Cleansing water once at Jordon closed around the one foretold,

Opened to reveal the glory ever new and ever old.

Living water, never ending, quench the thirst and flood the soul.

Wellspring, Source of life eternal, drench our dryness, make us whole.

(Sylvia Dunstan)

**Closing prayer: A Celtic Blessing**

May the road rise up to meet you,

May the wind be always at your back,

May the sun rise warm on your face,

The rain fall soft up on your fields,

And until we meet again may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

**AMEN**