

PHILIP

Acts 8:4-25

What do people want to see in a Christian? What is it that will attract people to ask questions and seek to discover the good news about Jesus for themselves? It varies from place to place and in different times in history. But what is always true is that people look for sincerity, for a life lived in accord with the faith that is proclaimed.

In Philip we find a man who is thoroughly converted. He has learned that Jesus is Lord, not only of him, or his Jewish friends, but of everyone. He has learned that he must love his enemies. And so when Philip leaves Jerusalem in the persecution after the death of his friend Stephen, he goes to the last place that any Jew would be seen dead: he goes to Samaria.

The Samaritans were the descendants of the people who had been left behind by the Babylonian armies when most of the people of Israel and then of Judah were taken into exile. The weak and the old were left, many of them from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, so used to worshipping God through the use of images (forbidden, of course in the Law) and at hill-top shrines, not in the Jerusalem temple. They intermarried with people from other parts of the empire who were sent to live in the now denuded land, and their religion was a syncretistic form of what Moses had taught. Mind you, *they* held that their faith was the purer, older form of truth, and that the temple worship was a later addition. Anyway, the Jews and Samaritans could not get along and regarded each other as natural enemies. But, or perhaps because of this, Philip went there when he had to flee from Jerusalem.

When Philip went to Samaria, the people there were conditioned to look for wonderful, unnatural signs. Up until now Simon the magician has been the best show in town. We're not told what sort of magic he did, whether he really did incredible things or if he was just a conjurer with a talent for self-promotion: the Derren Brown of his day. Certainly he was in it for what he could get. He liked to tell people that he was someone great, and no doubt he would have approved of the Magic Circle rule that the magician never tells how he does a trick.

Philip came and preached, and his preaching was accompanied by exorcisms - done publicly and dramatically - and by healings. The people were delighted with him and there was great joy in the city.

And many Samaritans were converted, believing in Jesus as the one who was to come. If you remember back to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, you will recall that when she ran out of arguments to use with Jesus, her line was "We know that the Messiah is coming and he will tell us everything." Now Philip proclaims that Messiah.

One of the things Philip has learned in his life of faith, is that as Christians, we have to trust. We have to trust God and we have to trust each other. He knew that this would not always work - he was part of the Jerusalem church at the time of the Ananias scandal, after all - but he went on trusting those who professed faith in Jesus. So when Simon professes faith, Philip accepts him unquestioningly.

Luke perhaps is a little more sceptical. He shows us Simon hanging around with Philip, always there with him. The implication might be that if he couldn't be the best show in town himself, he wanted to be associated with the one who was getting all the attention.

And then Peter and John come, and they lay hands on the believers and they all receive the Holy Spirit. We're not told how the Spirit showed himself, but it must have been obvious that there was a change in people. And Simon's old self reasserts

itself. He wants to be able to do that. He wants people to come to him for this power. He offers money for the gift, so no doubt he means to sell the benefits. Most of all though, he wants power. But God's power isn't given to make us important. If we haven't really given ourselves to Jesus' way of humility, it will come out in our actions in the end.

Philip had trusted Simon too soon, but now Peter shows the man what a poor convert he is, and he repents. He gets there in the end, even though it takes more than one Christian preacher to get him there. And so, in a way, Philip is justified. He has trusted those who profess Christ, and he has trusted God and God has sent Peter to sort out what he hadn't the insight to discover for himself.

There's certainly no idea that Philip is in disgrace, wither with Peter and John or with God - as witness the next adventure that comes his way.

Read Acts 8:26-40

In Samaria Philip has preached to crowds, but now he is sent to just one man. And again, Philip is the right person to send. Philip, more than even Peter at this stage (see chapter 10), has really taken on board that Jesus is not just for the Jews, or those of whom the Jews would approved. So here he is sent to someone who really would have been beyond the Jewish pale - an Ethiopian eunuch. Someone, who, by his clothing proclaimed his status as an emasculated official at the Ethiopian Queen's court.

People who were mutilated were not allowed to come into worship in the Jewish tradition, and there is no indication that this man was even a Jewish convert, so he was an out-and-out Gentile. Most Jews would have strived to avoid him, lest contact with him made them ritually unclean. And Philip was brought up a Jew: what we are brought up to think, the way we grow up learning to treat others, has a way of sticking with us, even if we know that it isn't necessarily the only or the best way.

But Philip trusts. He trusts that God knows what he is doing, and he trusts that when Jesus said that he was to love even his enemy that included those with whom he had never imagined himself fraternising.

Mind you, it's a funny picture we have, of Philip finding himself on the road, not knowing why he is there, and then the chariot coming up - a cloud in the distance behind him, and then growing larger, then the sound of hooves and out of the dust, the horses and the chariot swinging along behind them. And Philip has to run alongside to get the man's attention. And when he does, he realises that God certainly knows what he is up to, since the man is already reading Scripture.

(In those days people always read aloud, even when they were by themselves, so Philip would be able to hear what the man was reading.)

Obviously this man had been sent to Jerusalem on business for his Queen, and while there had picked up a portion of Scripture, perhaps curious to know about the strange beliefs of the Jews. Maybe his curiosity has been sparked by the unfortunate way in which he would have been treated by the most religious of the Jews: he was a eunuch and so they would have tried to avoid him. Maybe it was in a mood of wounded pride that he was trying to find out more. However it came about, now he was puzzling over the obscure words of Isaiah, and Philip saw his chance.

He offers to explain it, and no doubt is grateful when he is offered a ride in the chariot. So he explains about Jesus. About his life and his death and his work of salvation.

Then they come to water, and the man asks to be baptised. No hesitation here.

No wondering if he really understands what he is doing, if he will keep up as a Christian, if he will follow the right way. A later version of the text adds in a verse 37, where Philip asks the man if he believes with all his heart and he says that he does, but the earliest versions of the text don't have this. The request for baptism is seen as evidence enough of faith.

I know that it's different then and now, because then Baptism hadn't had time to get distorted in the popular imagination, into a lucky charm sort of ritual, but all the same, I think there are things which we can learn from Philip's readiness to give baptism whenever it was requested.

Simon was baptised, as it turned out before he repented, but God was able to do the work, even if it wasn't in what we might have thought the best order. This official might have looked like a poor candidate for a committed Christian life. He had only just heard of Jesus, he can't have had much idea really of the need to change one's life to follow him. Philip had no way of knowing if there would be anyone to help him grow in his faith when he got back to his home. But he baptised him. And still today there is a Christian church in Ethiopia, which is pleased to claim its descent from this one man. Certainly it is a most ancient church.

Philip, you see, trusted. He trusted that if he really lived the way that Jesus taught then God would use him, and he was right. The people of Samaria might have flocked to see the signs and wonders, but their faith in Jesus would have proved as transient as their wonder at the magician's tricks if there hadn't been a life of substance behind it.

The Ethiopian too would have seen that Philip practised what he preached when he not only spoke to him voluntarily, but even got into the chariot with him. And so a church was founded.

Philip trusted. He trusted God and he trusted those who professed faith in Jesus. For most of us, this last is the harder of the two. We know our own human failings and so we find it hard to believe that similar human failings won't win out with others as well. But God is working among us, and when we trust each other to each do our part to live as Christ called us, not seeking our own reputation, but his; not going only where we would prefer to be, but where there is need; not minding when another Christian exercises gifts we don't have, but rejoicing that the gospel is so well served: when we do this, when we trust each other, then our faith in God is justified and the gospel will go forward in ways that we can't imagine.