

## Whose Sharing The Old, Old Story

Jesus sent his twelve with this charge: "Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighbourhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here".

"God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

Join in this **opening prayer**:

Loving God, throned in highest heaven, the Almighty: who speaks and creates, whose Word is life itself. I rejoice that the earth and all who live in it are yours. I who live in the world count this a privilege beyond all other and therefore ponder the question - who can stand before you - for I know that I do not always have clean hands and a pure heart.

Yet I know that you have reached out to me in Jesus and have reconciled me to you and to others in Christ. You are God who comes among us, born in a stable Jesus who taught and healed. You call me, and you reach out in Spirit and welcome me into your presence. So I lift up my head and praise you for coming into my heart. May my time of worship today leave no doubt that you are the King of glory not only in my hearts and life but also in my witness to those around me in this part of the world in which I live.

Lord Jesus Christ, teach me to honour you not just through songs of worship, words of prayer or the outward practice of religion, but also through my life rooted in you, entwined with yours and producing fruits of the Spirit, my love, joy, peace and humility speaking to others of you. Dwell in me and unite me with you, that I may truly glorify your name, here; and everywhere. Amen.

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### **The Ethiopian Eunuch – a reflective meditation**

Now it makes sense! At last, after all those hours of study, all those times reading it again and again, at last I can understand what the prophet was on about. It was a mystery before, a closed book despite my every attempt to decipher it, and I was on the point of giving up, throwing it in as a waste of time. But I gave it one last try, not wanting to be beaten. I was fascinated you see, intrigued and challenged by those words: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, like a lamb silent before its shearer.'

What sort of person could be like that, I wondered? And why? Why? Was it courage? Was it terror? Was it madness? Was it guilt? I had to know, longed to find the answer, yet could get no nearer the truth.

'Does it matter?' they asked me. Is it really worth bothering about?' And if that had been all there was to it, mere curiosity, then of course I'd have said no. But there was more than that, much more, for it was what the prophet went on to say that compounded the ride and made me hunger to understand - 'He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many.' That's what got me - what sort of person would do that? And what sort of God would allow it?

I couldn't work it out, but I was determined to try, for it was clear that here was someone special, someone beyond your average man. So I turned to it again, struggling to comprehend, almost consumed with frustration, and suddenly this stranger appeared, out of the blue. Philip he said his

name was, one of a group apparently who followed Jesus, and he told me exactly what the passage meant. Not a quick or easy answer, not some pat explanation that he'd learned off by heart, but a detailed careful interpretation, word by word; what the prophet had meant all those years ago, what it meant to him now and to his fellow-believers, and finally what it could mean, what it did mean, for me and anyone willing to listen It was marvellous!

At long last I understood! And what a message, what a wonderful unforgettable message! I had to work at it long and hard, struggling to understand, and it would have been so easy to have given up. But I kept on looking, kept on seeking, until finally I found. Now, at last, it makes sense!

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Our **Scripture reading** today is taken from the book of Acts 8:1-25 and is the Good News translation.

That very day the church in Jerusalem began to suffer cruel persecution. All the believers, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the provinces of Judea and Samaria. Some devout men buried Stephen, mourning for him with loud cries.

But Saul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into jail.

### **The Gospel Is Preached in Samaria**

The believers who were scattered went everywhere, preaching the message. Philip went to the principal city in Samaria and preached the Messiah to the people there. <sup>6</sup>The crowds paid close attention to what Philip said, as they listened to him and saw the miracles that he performed. Evil spirits came out from many people with a loud cry, and many paralyzed and lame people were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

A man named Simon lived there, who for some time had astounded the Samaritans with his magic. He claimed that he was someone great, and everyone in the city, from all classes of society, paid close attention to him. "He is that power of God known as 'The Great Power,'" they said. They paid this attention to him because for such a long time he had astonished them with his magic. But when they believed Philip's message about the good news of the Kingdom of God and about Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself also believed; and after being baptized, he stayed close to Philip and was astounded when he saw the great wonders and miracles that were being performed.

The apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had received the word of God, so they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for the believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit had not yet come down on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Simon saw that the Spirit had been given to the believers when the apostles placed their hands on them. So he offered money to Peter and John, and said, "Give this power to me too, so that anyone I place my hands on will receive the Holy Spirit."

But Peter answered him, "May you and your money go to hell, for thinking that you can buy God's gift with money! You have no part or share in our work, because your heart is not right in God's sight.

Repent, then, of this evil plan of yours, and pray to the Lord that he will forgive you for thinking such a thing as this. For I see that you are full of bitter envy and are a prisoner of sin.”

Simon said to Peter and John, “Please pray to the Lord for me, so that none of these things you spoke of will happen to me.”

After they had given their testimony and proclaimed the Lord's message, Peter and John went back to Jerusalem. On their way they preached the Good News in many villages of Samaria.

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**Philip, the Evangelist**

As we continue our journey in the life of the early church’s believers who took to heart the call to not only be a disciple of Jesus, but an apostle - as we have learnt, one sent out - the next person we endeavour to learn about is Philip. Along with Stephen, Philip was one of the “Seven” deacons chosen by the early church to assist the Twelve in the daily distribution of alms in the form of money or food. Besides Stephen, Philip is the only other deacon we know anything about in terms of his character and life. Nothing was written of the other five.

As a deacon, Philip exercised his divinely given tact and wisdom in the administration of daily resources, but he also performed a ministry of mercy with the poor, spearheading aggressive evangelism. What we discover of Philip were qualifications the apostles sought in one being “Christian” worker, namely he was chosen from one among the believers, who had a good reputation and was full of the Spirit who full hi with wisdom and sanctified common sense.

However, Philip, like Stephen, also possessed another strength or gift of the Holy Spirit, as he was also call “the evangelist”. The word evangelist comes from two words which mean “good” and “announce.” - hence an evangelist is a proclaimer of Good News, possessing a clear grasp of the Gospel, a deep passion to herald it, an abiding confidence that God will cause hearers to respond and the satisfying joy of seeing converts come to Christ.

Though not ordained as minister of the Word, this godly and gifted man, Philip, could not be limited to the serving of tables. Faithful completion of his deacon responsibilities led Philip to a clear and courageous witness in his preaching placing him at the forefront of all evangelists, not because he is the first and only one so described in the New Testament (Acts 21:8), but because of his evangelistic ministry as recorded in the book of Acts.

In Acts 8, which I encourage you to go and read the whole chapter, we hear of Philip's evangelical efforts: a successful citywide crusade in Samaria, which is north west of Jerusalem and then a one-to-one soul-winning effort in the Gaza desert, which is south west of Jerusalem and touching upon the Mediterranean coast. Philip too, is credited as being the first missionary who evangelised an alien race.

When persecution has scattered the believers, Samaria seemed an unlikely target for evangelism. Remember, the Samaritans were despised by the Jews who would have nothing to do with them. They were considered an amalgamation of northern Jews and Assyrians who had their own temple and faulty rituals. Yet in the Gospels we read on several occasions how Jesus treated these people. At the well of Samaria, Jesus deliberately struck up a conversation with a Samaritan woman of bad repute and so led her to trust in Him as the Messiah. This in turn unleashed her to be a missionary to her fellow Samaritans (John 4:1-42). In Jesus teaching, as a model of kindness, he used the example of a "good Samaritan", the last person in the world to whom a Jew would have attributed such a virtue (Luke 10:30-37). Remember too the ten lepers whom Jesus miraculously healed, how only one returned to

say thank you, he was a Samaritan (Luke 17:12-19) What of Jesus' last command when expressly charging His followers to be witnesses in Samaria (Acts 1:8). All these episodes, they had not been lost on Philip, who went into the city of Samaria and there he preached Jesus Christ to them. (Acts 8:5).

We are told crowds paid close attention to his message, as unclean spirits were cast out, paralytics and lame people walked. Great joy enveloped the city – wow imagine that happening in our cities and towns today, in this modern world it would go viral within minutes – and in a way it did, because when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the Gospel, they immediately sent Peter and John to investigate this new advance of Gospel preaching. What was Philip's response to all this, would he resent apostolic intrusion into his fruitful ministry at Samaria? To his credit, Philip was not threatened but instead delighted at the visit by Peter and John and their noble conduct is also worthy of note because they could have been tempted to begrudge the successful labours of Philip. However they did not debunk the victories of Philip in Samaria and as they had not envied the apologetic capability of Stephen at Jerusalem. Neither did they remind Philip that his proper place was serving tables, not preaching. Instead they pitched right in to help nurture the converts and who knows maybe even the influence of the Samaritan woman, seed sown by Jesus at the well years earlier, helped pave the way for the success of this Samaritan crusade.

The passages we read earlier today for our service, reflect upon the second account we have of Philip's evangelical outreach and this takes place in the Gaza Desert, which is a long way from Samaria, for Philip must have wondered why he had to go do there when there was so much success happening in Samaria. However a messenger from the Lord had told him to go and in obedience Philip arose and went. We told that as he walked along the desert highway, still puzzled as to why he was led here, Philip spotted a well-to-do caravan coming his way. At it's the centre an Ethiopian Government official, the treasurer for Queen Candace, returning not from a political assignment but instead from a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Told by the Spirit of God to approach this chariot, Philip ran toward the Ethiopian, who had somehow acquired a copy of the Scriptures and was heard reading from Isaiah 53. When Philip heard this, if asked him if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian we told ordered his driver to stop the chariot, and invited Philip to, "Come up, sit beside me, and explain it to me". Doing so Philip climbed aboard and pointing to the Isaiah passage, the Ethiopian asked, "Is Isaiah speaking of himself, or of someone else?"

Imagine Philip's reaction to all this! I would think it was one of awe and amazement, suddenly being given the perfect opportunity to share or announce the good news of the gospel. The very core of his ministry given to him on a golden salver for as any who know and have read Isaiah 53, it gives such graphic picture of the suffering and victory of Christ and how Jesus was wounded for our transgressions and put to death on the cross. Philip was given the invitation to explain how Jesus rose from the dead and forgives all who repent and believe in Him. Philip was not preaching Jesus as a mere prophet, but instead as the suffering, crucified, living Saviour and Redeemer of humankind. The Ethiopian having opened his heart to hear the good news, now wanted to be a follower of Lord Jesus himself. Had not Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples said, go making disciples of all nations and also to baptise them? So as the chariot rolled along the desert road and came to a body of water, the Ethiopian immediately asked, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

Acts 8 concludes that at the new convert's confession of faith, both went down into the water for the baptismal service; joy abounded with the Ethiopian going on his way rejoicing and that caught up in the Spirit, Lord took Philip off to new opportunities as he found himself moving north along the Mediterranean coastal towns of Azotus, also known as the Philistine city of Ashod, passing through all the towns probably through Ekron, Joppa, Appolonia, and the plain of Sharon to Caesarea and as he travelled that route, he also preached the Gospel. Always the evangelist, yet Philip a lay person, not ordained, not one of the Twelve, did what he believed he was called to do as a follower of Jesus, having

been sent out, he shared the good news with all and any who would hear it.

So again we are reminded that one does not need to have a theological degree or be ordained to tell the story of Jesus, you just need to have the gift of evangelism. The average Christian congregation can realistically expect that approximately 10 percent of its active adult members will have been given the gift of evangelism. But you know, even those without the gift can have a share in winning the lost for Jesus – when last did you tell someone the old, old story of Jesus and his love?

Who cannot recall **the hymn** – written by Arabella Catherine Hankey (1834-1911) “*Tell me the old, old story*” which is found in Church Hymnary 3, number 132, that great children’s and Sunday School favourite of so many and sung to the appropriately named tune, “Evangel” with the refrain we all know.

Tell me the old, old story, of unseen things above,  
of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love;  
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,  
for I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.

*Tell me the old, old story,  
Tell me the old, old story,  
Tell me the old, old story,  
of Jesus and His love.*

Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in -  
that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin;  
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon,  
the "early dew" of morning has passed away at noon.

Tell me the story softly, with earnest tones and grave;  
Remember I'm the sinner whom Jesus came to save;  
Tell me the story always, if you would really be,  
in any time of trouble, a comforter to me.

Tell me the same old story, when you have cause to fear  
that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear;  
And when the Lord's bright glory is dawning on my soul,  
tell me the old, old story: "Christ Jesus makes thee whole."

Join with this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you have told us that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled. That is what we see in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, years of searching at last rewarded as in you, he found the answer to his prayers.

Lord Jesus, teach me to seek truth with the same dedication, to read the Scriptures with the same desire for illumination, and to respond to your love with the same enthusiasm. May I, like him, find the pieces of my life fitting together until finally it all begins to make sense.

Gracious God, thank you for the love of Jesus Christ – my friend and Saviour who loves me, who offers reassurance, who brings hope. Thank you for the ways in which the people of your church show the goodness of Christ to each other: for the hidden kindnesses of one person to another; for the work and perseverance of those who want a better life for everyone. For all the blessings of this life, I give thanks



to You, Creator God. For families, friends, colleagues, neighbours, and strangers, who nurture us, that the love of God may grow within. That Your love, your Word, like a seed, may grow to produce in me and others, good fruit. May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For the leaders of various nations and cities, that they may lead with strong hearts and gentle hands and generous spirits, with compassion and mercy, with wisdom and grace. May they reflect your will guiding all their actions and decisions. May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who serve in harms way, those who live in dangerous places, those who live in areas of war and strife, those who live in fear, those who worry about employment, bills, food, and struggle just to find dignity in life. May your grace bring peace and safety to all people, one to another. May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who suffer from any illness or disease of mind, body, or spirit. Restore these, and all those I carry in my heart, to fullness of health — health as only you, O God, can bring. May your mercy shower each with healing mercy and love. May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who are dying, and for those who have died. Send forth your comforting love. Give solace to those who mourn. Console those who grieve. May your grace surround them and me like a mantle upon our heads, a shawl upon our shoulders, a hand, to hold our hand. May your love, be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

All this I pray, together with the prayers of the hearts of others in your name Jesus Christ and in the words you taught, saying: Our Father ..., Amen.

**A Blessing:**

May the love of the Lord Jesus draw you to himself;  
may the power of the Lord Jesus strengthen you in his service;  
may the joy of the Lord Jesus fill your soul;  
and may the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with you and abide with you always. Amen.