**Easter 4 - May 2nd 2021**

**Transcript**

**Theme:** The Christian/Faith Journey

**Introduction and Welcome - Rev Keith Albans**

Whenever and wherever we are in time and space, I welcome you in the name of Jesus to this service. My name is Keith Albans and I’m the Methodist Superintendent Minister of the York Circuit and minister in Dunnington as part of the benefice and ecumenical partnership.

In this Easter season the Lectionary readings have offered us glimpses of the life of the early Church through the Acts of the Apostles. Our theme today is ‘the Christian Journey’ and we’ll be focussing on the story of Philip and the Ethiopian from Acts 8. Tradition links this encounter with the founding of the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church, and we’ve used some material from that tradition in our liturgy today.

So we keep a moment of quiet before I say an opening prayer.

We will come into your house in the multitude of your mercy: and in your fear we will worship toward your holy temple. Lead us, O Lord, in your righteousness because of our enemies; make your way straight before us, that with a clear mind we may glorify you forever, One Divine Power worshipped in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Song - Amazing Grace**

1. Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost, but now I’m found

Was blind but now I see

1. ‘Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear

And Grace, my fears relieved

How precious did that Grace appear

The hour I first believed

1. Through many dangers, toils and snares

I have already come

‘Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far

And Grace will lead me home

1. The Lord has promised good to me,

His word my hope secures

He will my shield and portion be

As long as life endures

1. When we’ve been there a thousand years,

Bright shining as the sun

We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise

Than when we first begun

**Reading: Acts 8:26-40**

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### **Philip and the Ethiopian**

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,

and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,

so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

**Interview with Dana - the journey of faith**

**Question:** Today we are thinking about the journey of faith, its beginnings and its moments of struggle. Dana how did your journey of faith begin?

**Dana:** My journey of faith began **in 2000** after my annual visit to see my family in Slovakia and my mum said she started going to the church. It was a great surprise to me because when I was growing up the, church did not feature in our lives **apart from Christmas and Easter celebrations which were mainly a social family gatherings.**

After this visit the thought of **my mum’s desire to explore the Christian faith and it’s meaning** was at the back of my mind and would not leave me alone.

Shortly afterwards an invitation came from Dunnington Methodist Church to **Alpha supper** and a talk about Christian Faith. I went and loved the ideas presented by the speaker about the Christian community giving people **a sense of belonging.** The speaker talked **about Jesus** in a natural and heart-warming way. I was hooked, intrigued and fascinated at the same time.

The introduction was followed by weekly discussions and through talking about effect of faith on my life and life of others I was led by three wonderful people to believe there was something i**n faith that I actually needed.** Only then was I ready to make that big step of going into the church one Sunday. This was due the people I got to know and respect over a number of weeks and only then I felt ready to try it out.

**Ethiopian prayer - in place of the prayers of Absolution and Confession**

O heavenly King, O Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who art in all places and fillest all things: Treasury of good things and Giver of life: Come and dwell in us and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O gracious Lord. **Amen**

All-holy Trinity, have mercy on us. Lord, cleanse us from our sins. Master, pardon our iniquities. Holy God visit and heal our infirmities for Thy Name’s sake.

Lord, have mercy. 3x

**Reading: John 15:1-8**

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

**Song - A New Commandment**

**Refrain**

A new commandment I give unto you,

That you love one another as I have loved you,

That you love one another as I have loved you.

1. By this shall all know that you are My disciples,

if you have love one for another.

By this shall all know that you are My disciples,

if you have love one for another.

**Refrain**

1. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Without my help you can do nothing.

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Without my help you can do nothing.

**Refrain**

1. I am the true vine, my Father is the gard'ner.

Abide in me: I will be with you.

I am the true vine, my Father is the gard'ner.

Abide in me: I will be with you.

**Refrain**

1. True love is patient, not arrogant nor boastful;

Love bears all things, love is eternal.

True love is patient, not arrogant nor boastful;

Love bears all things, love is eternal.

**Refrain**

**Interview with Dana - the journey of faith**

**Question:** In our reading from John’s Gospel we understand that God will shape and prune us so that we may become more fruitful. Do you have any examples of this on your faith journey?

**Dana:** I love the way you’ve put the words like **prune and shape** in your question. Because having had a spiritual awakening it meant I wanted to tell everybody about it and **I was met by huge resistance** from some of my friends & some derision of my own family. The people were telling me about their bad personal experiences in the church, wars caused by religions, where is God when there is suffering and did I really believe what I was told about Jesus.

My way of dealing with it was to read books and go to the church on Sundays. To listen what was said by the preachers, follow the readings from the bible and did what I heard resonate with my values? I needed to supplement my understanding by other peoples’ experiences from the books I found in the bookshops because suddenly I found myself in the middle of this enormous jigsaw puzzle.

To balance the negativity encountered I formed wonderful friendships with people I would not have otherwise met. This happened when I became involved in the service to the church. Basically, I am a practical person & I was looking to be involved in activities. With much trepidation I helped to run kiddies church and found an outlet. Help was there when I needed it and that is a complete mystery for me, when you need someone they appear..

**Homily - Rev Nick Bird**

I am the vine; the Father is the gardener; you are the branches.

God shapes our lives. The 'you' that Jesus speaks of is plural rather than singular. God shapes his church, the people who are intimately connected with Jesus, collectively and singularly, so that they can be fruitful.

In Acts 1.8 Jesus declares that his followers will be his Spirit-led “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” They are busy being fruitful. By the time Acts 8.26 comes around, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, they have been in all those places (Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria) except one: the ends of the earth, wherever that is.

The encounter on a road connecting Jerusalem to Gaza is about expanding horizons—Philip’s, the Ethiopian’s, and ours. It provokes a question upon which the church still ruminates, as it makes one new discovery after another: what will it mean for all of us if the gospel is indeed good news *for all people*, without exception?

The narrative is beginning to branch out, and that movement will accelerate as soon as Acts 9 begins and Saul meets the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. If any readers are wondering how far the church’s witness might go and whom it might reach, Acts 8:26 answers: very far and every kind of person. Don’t be surprised at what the Lord might do.

The appearance of an Ethiopian in Acts might well elicit thoughts of “the ends of the earth,” from a Roman’s limited outlook on the world. He’s an official, an important man, in charge of the queen’s treasury. He’s literate and wealthy enough to have an Isaiah scroll and use of a chariot. He went to worship in Jerusalem, meaning that he is most likely Jewish (rather than a God-fearing Gentile, of which we hear in other places), but otherwise he is an outsider in a number of ways – foreign, black (the name Ethiopian comes from the word that means 'burnt face', used by the Greeks to mean people who come from south of Egypt), and a Eunuch – an anathema to Roman and others' notional of masculinity, neither male nor female in their eyes.

In this story, the life of the eunuch (no name is given) is being shaped as he accepts Christ and is baptised – effectively he becomes both the first convert, that we know of, from sub-Saharan Africa, and the first missionary to return there, as he 'goes on his way rejoicing'. His life is reshaped.

Philip, too, will have been changed. A chapter or two earlier, Philip (along with Stephen, who was stoned to death in the presence of Saul soon after) was one of a group of men set aside as deacons in the church, in order to serve the community of Jesus-followers. He was not an apostle or evangelist, and yet here he is, and Acts tells us that *'Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus'*. The servants of the community are bringing people to Christ by their witness, being fruitful by their faithfulness.

But this event must surely have also changed the shape of the church, collectively, and its understanding of what 'to the ends of the earth' means, it's interpretation of scripture, and who is included in the kingdom of God.

Let me remind you, as we seek to live faithfully to the biblical witness:

The bible is clear (Dt. 23): Moabites are bad. They were not to be allowed to dwell among God’s people. **But then** comes the story of “Ruth the Moabite,” which challenges the prejudice against Moabites.

The bible is clear (Jer. 25): People from Uz are evil. **But then** comes the story of Job, a man from Uz who was the “most blameless man on earth.”

The bible is clear: God’s people hated Samaritans. **But then** Jesus tells a story that shows not all Samaritans were bad.

The bible is clear (Dt. 23): No foreigners or eunuchs allowed. **But then** comes the story of an African eunuch welcomed into the church (Acts 8).

The biblical story may begin with prejudice, discrimination, and animosity, but the Spirit moves God’s people towards openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance, and affirmation.

It was the Spirit that told Philip to approach the chariot. It is the Spirit of God who shapes us, the gardener who tends the vine. And the 'us' is always in the plural as much as the singular. Shaping us for inclusion. Shaping us for participation. Shaping us for belonging. Shaping us for mission and fruitfulness. Shaping us to be deeply rooted in Christ, yet outward looking and outward growing.

The radical inclusion of the love of God means that, as we live Christ's story, we find that we too are accepted, that we too can grow to accept ourselves, and that everyone is welcomed in 'from the ends of the earth'. And may we go on your way rejoicing in the joy of the Lord.

Thank you to everyone who has helped to lead our service, and while travel to Ethiopia and many other places may not be possible at the moment, God’s call to us to continue on our Christian journey is still one to which we can respond. So let us pray.

God the Father, by whose glory Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen you to walk with him in his risen life; and may almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**.

**Intercessions**

In our Easter journey and in the current optimism around national freedom to travel, we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit for ourselves, the church and the world, that God will continue to lovingly protect and guide all his people.

Acknowledging our faults and frailties, we celebrate the companions provided to accompany and help us deal with personal uncertainties, lack of sense of purpose, and

shortage of stamina. Grant us understanding and the assurance of scripture as our map and compass. Lord in your Mercy**, Hear our prayer**

May the Church and its leaders focus on your love and provide the care and friendship that the world needs in a time of plague and tension. Inspire us confidently to bring the good news of resurrection and new life to those we meet. Bless our archbishops, Justin as he commences his period of retreat and refreshment; Stephen as the challenges of international prominence fill his pathway. Grant them peace and strength. Lord in your Mercy**, Hear our prayer**

Have mercy on those who are without security of finance, health, or housing. Look with kindness on those who have lost their sense of purpose. Save those who have suffered the agonies and anguish brought by the pandemic: we remember those enduring the turmoil in the Asian sub-continent. Bring all your people back to the one sure source of life in Christ.

Lord in your Mercy**, Hear our prayer**

We offer to you our prayer for the healing of the needs of the communities in this benefice. The people who are isolated, uncertain, or poorly. The bereaved, and the many who ache to meet loved ones face to face again. Bless them.

And now, a prayer from the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Tradition:

O Christ our God, who at all times and in every hour in heaven and on earth, are worshipped and glorified; who are long suffering, merciful and compassionate; who loves the just and shows mercy to the sinners; who calls all to salvation through the promise of blessings to come; O Lord in this hour, receive our supplications, and direct our lives according to Your commandments. Sanctify Our souls, hallow our bodies, correct our thoughts, cleanse our minds; deliver us from all tribulation, evil and distress. Encompass us with Your holy Angels, that, guided and guarded by them, we may attain to the unity of the faith and to the knowledge of Your unapproachable glory, for You are blessed Unto ages of ages. **Amen.**

**Lord’s prayer**

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever.

**Amen**.

**Interview with Dana - the journey of faith**

**Question:** So where do you believe your faith journey is taking you now Dana?

**Answer**: **Christian community** is like any other community, people have their opinions, ideas and their own struggles. We live in an individualistic society which puts demands on any community and forces them to respond. The ability to navigate through so many influences puts stresses and demands on church communities and the people within.

For me the journey has become much simpler over the years because now I do not rely on my own strengths to do what I am prompted to do but am guided by **Jesus’s teaching of LOVE**. Once you accept the Christian wisdom through the ages you cannot rest on this journey and be content with status quo. Changes are part of life and response to those changes need to be prayerful and realistic. In 20 years what I found to be true that my faith is not a result of magic or delusion but is an answer to my need within to respond and make my life richer because there is so much more to know and to understand.

**Song - Refiner’s fire**

1. Purify my heart

Let me be as gold and precious silver

Purify my heart

Let me me as gold, pure gold

**Refrain**

Refiner’s fire

My heart’s one desire

Is to be, holy

Set apart for you, Lord

I choose to be holy

Set apart for You, my Master

Ready to do Your will

1. Purify my heart,

Cleanse me from within and make me holy.

Purify my heart,

Cleanse me from my sin, deep within.

**Blessing**

Thank you to everyone who has helped to lead our service, and while travel to Ethiopia and many other places may not be possible at the moment, God’s call to us to continue on our Christian journey is still one to which we can respond. So let us pray.

God the Father, by whose glory Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen you to walk with him in his risen life; and may almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**.