

## Philip the Evangelist

**PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean**

Sunday, May 14<sup>th</sup> 2006  
Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

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I've got to come completely clean with you and own up. Gill and I have got some friends staying with us this weekend who are **Baptists**. Well, let's say *lapsed* Baptists shall we, because they've been going to an Anglican church for the past few years so they're well on the way to salvation.

So it's a happy coincidence that we've got a baptism this morning – even if the amount of water we use doesn't quite come up to the Baptists mark.

Now I'm not saying it keeps me awake at night, but there's a question rattling around my head about baptism in the cathedral that is in need of an answer. Where should we put the font?

Traditionally, you put the font near the main door of a church. Baptism is about initiation, beginnings. If you want to be a member of a church then you must be baptised, that's the first step. You make your profession of faith and then you step into the community of faith. You believe, then you start belonging.

But now this thinking is changing. For some years now, people have seen a shift in the wind. It's now far more common for people to belong to a church for some time before they move towards believing.

And of course infant baptism **assumes** the importance of belonging before believing, because young Bryciuf this morning is going to rely on the faith and support of Matthew & Kathy, and the church, until they reach a point when they can affirm the faith for themselves.

If that's the case, shouldn't we move the font? Is baptism a step that is now coming later on the journey of faith? If so, let's put the font further in to the body of the cathedral. Is the font a place you should reach only after a longer journey?

There's an answer to this question in the passage from Acts 8, which focuses on Philip the Evangelist. It draws a picture of him that leaves many lines for us to read between, and offers some tantalising glimpses into who he was, and the driving force behind his life, and the fact that he left a code of da Vinci proportions to tell us to move the Cathedral font.

Philip the Evangelist, so called to distinguish him from Philip the Apostle (the character we find in the gospels), was one of the seven men of good reputation, full of the spirit and wisdom, selected to administer the daily distribution to widows and others in need in Acts 6.

A big disagreement had emerged in the early Church between the Gentile and Jewish Christians. The Gentile Christians felt that the Jewish Christians were being given preferential treatment in the handouts to the needy. The famous 'common purse' of the early church was being manipulated along cultural and ethnic lines.

To tackle the problem required enormous diplomacy, tact and wisdom. Those selected to administer the hand outs of money had to be people who were skilled in being able to reconcile the Jewish and Gentile Christians with one another. They had to be people who were able to cross between those boundaries and be accepted on both sides. Mediators, if you like. Peace-brokers. And Philip was one of these.

Then in chapter 8 we discover 3 things about Philip that reinforce this impression of him.

**1) He goes to Samaria to preach following the dispersion of the Church after persecution.**

Samaritans were despised by the Jews. Remember Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan? In the eyes of his contemporaries no Samaritan could be 'good'. Remember John 4 and the story of Jesus with the woman at the well? Not only was it outrageous for Jesus to speak to her because she was a woman, but also because she was a Samaritan.

So here's another cultural and religious divide. You don't have to look too far for its modern equivalent - Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; Serb and Croat in the Balkans; Jew and Palestinian in the Middle East; Christian and Muslim just about everywhere.

It takes a special sort of person to span those sorts of divisions. As the Christians were dispersed from Jerusalem, Philip went to Samaria, the place of the despised outsider.

**2) While he was there we read of his ministry with Simon the Sorcerer,** or Simon Magus as he is sometimes known, an infamous pseudo-Christian who apparently accompanied Philip for some time after his conversion.

Not only is there quite a lot about Simon in the pages of Acts, but there is also a considerable body of literature outside the New Testament. This was somebody who caused quite a stir in his day, and early Christian writers made a point of denouncing him in no uncertain terms. He is considerably more famous (or infamous!) than most of the Christians we encounter in the book of Acts.

He was somebody whose Christianity raised suspicion at the very least. He was unorthodox in his beliefs. He was provocative, selfish, liberal in his views, morally suspect, and yet he accompanied Philip for some time after his conversion. And Philip accompanied him.

This is a fascinating relationship. I somehow get the feeling that if it had been St Paul who had come across Simon, well he would have been firmer, more forthright. He would have delivered him to Satan or something like that.

But Philip hung in there with a generosity of spirit and an openness to Simon with all his foibles, with all his unorthodoxy, with all the suspicion about his character. Philip hung in there and offered him the hand of friendship and fellowship.

**3) And then we read the extraordinary story of Philip being called by God to witness to the Ethiopian eunuch** - a high up treasury minister who Philip is instrumental in converting.

Well, here are more cultural barriers to cross. He was a Gentile and a eunuch and therefore doubly excluded from the inner sanctum of religion. Excluded by everybody it seems apart from Philip, who far from begrudgingly agreeing to speak to him 'runs to him', and ends up baptising him on the spot. One up for the Baptists. There is an eagerness about Philip's desire to engage with this very different, unconventional and excluded individual.

I hope you can begin to see a pattern emerging from these little cameos of Philip's life. He was a man with the grace to cross all sorts of cultural barriers and taboos in order to bring the message of Christ. Here is somebody with an accepting type of Christianity, a generous, embracing, and graceful type of Christianity.

And as such Philip is a challenge to so much of the aloof, clearly defined, safe and protective Christianity which seems to grace the Western world these days.

He was a man who was passionate about his faith, but in all these stories you find a willingness to be fuzzy at the edges. There is a gracefulness about him, an ability to accept and not judge people, even when they are people who others would not have touched with a spiritual bargepole.

It is an easy enough thing to preach that we should individually be more like Philip. He was an extraordinary man and provides an example for individual Christians to follow in an age of cultural, ethnic and racial division.

But I think I want to make a more corporate point about Philip's life, which is to say that the **Church** collectively needs to become more like Philip. Our faith should be full of grace. This cathedral needs to be an accepting community, non-judgemental with open doors. Fuzzy round our edges, permeable, open for all who come in. A reconciling community prepared to embrace those who are suspect for all sorts of reasons - the unorthodox, the provocative, the liberal, the morally suspect, the outsider, the excluded.

And that's why we need to move the font.