

Acts 8:30

Do you understand what you are reading?

From time to time, people ask me how I became a Methodist minister

- And what I did before I was a minister
- The latter question is the easier one to answer
- First I was at school, then I was a law student in Leicester
- And then I worked for a year for Plymouth Argyle Football Club

The former question is more difficult to answer but here is the short answer

- One day, I was sitting in the student union coffee bar, where I had my lunch
- And, with another young man also a Christian, I was defending my Christian faith
- I had made tentative steps of Christian faith from about 12 years old onwards
- But this was my first experience away from a home where my parents believed
- And now I was, perhaps for the first time, standing as a Christian, independently

I thought that my student friends would be hostile to my faith but very few were

- Most of them were tolerant of my beliefs, others were interested
- I was at a new church (not a Methodist Church) my minister preached from the Bible
- And I was confident that my student friends would be welcome
- I began inviting them to come to the church and, on 13 February 1977, one came
- Over the next two years and four months, until I left Leicester, 32 students came
- And six of these trusted in Jesus for themselves

In March 1979, my third year at Leicester, I turned down my place at the College of Law

- And after graduating that summer, offered as a local preacher and minister
- When I first became an accredited Methodist preacher, in February 1980
- I was presented with a Bible
- And on the presentation plate was a text from the Bible
- ‘do the work of an evangelist’
- I was excited about that because it was what I believed God called me to do
- And here in this passage (Acts 8) we have a great example
- Of what it means ‘to do the work of an evangelist’

The New Testament book that we call ‘Acts’ is all about the growth of the church

- From the day of Pentecost onwards, God, by his Spirit, has been doing a great work
- After the crucifixion of Jesus, the eleven faithful disciples were demoralised
- But his resurrection, empty tomb, appearances and ascension into heaven
- Had caused them to wait for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit with new hope
- Now, by the grace of God, the Lord’s word is coming true
- That these men should be apostles, witnessing about Jesus to Judea (near Jerusalem)
- To Samaria (a little further away) and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)

In ancient literature Ethiopia was considered to be at the ends of the earth

- Though maybe it was more the beginning of the ends of the earth
- Than the people of the New Testament would have realised

Philip, one of the men who had been appointed to help with food distribution to widows

- Had clearly proved himself worthy and like Stephen, the first Christian martyr
- Had moved into a different area of Christian service, as an evangelist
- Had begun preaching in Samaria to great crowds (Acts 8:4-8)
- But now, he has been sent to the wilderness side of Jerusalem towards Gaza
- Not to meet crowds but just one man, an Ethiopian

The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia lay between Aswan and Khartoum

- Which in the Old Testament was called Cush
- And corresponds to modern Nubia
- An area of what is now Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan
- It is likely that the Ethiopian was a black African

The Bible describes the Ethiopian as a 'eunuch', but does it mean it literally?

- In the Methodist Church older ministers still refer to something called July committee
- This is a meeting that recommends candidates to be trained as ministers
- I was really confused when someone told me that I had to go to 'July committee'
- Because the date they gave me was in March
- The thing is that the meeting always used to be in July and keeps the name
- In Ethiopia there had been a time when high ranking officials had been eunuchs
- But by New Testament times 'eunuch' could simply have been a governmental title
- And does not have to imply emasculation
- But what is certain is that the man was a high-ranking government official

Only the most well-to-do had chariots in those days but this man fits the bill

- For we would call him the minister of finance or chancellor of the exchequer
- Interestingly enough, this man had gone to Jerusalem to worship
- That might not seem all that spectacular to us
- But it was notable that such a man (a gentile) had gone to Jerusalem
- Perhaps he was a proselyte (that is a convert to Judaism)
- Or perhaps he was what is known as a Proselyte of the Gate
- Not counted as a perfect Israelite
- but someone who had professed faith in God and followed Jewish observances
- what we can conclude is that he was a religious man, a seeker after truth

So far so good, but what relevance does this have to us?

- for some reason the Ethiopian official was reading a part of the Bible
- although in Britain this is not universal as it once was
- nevertheless, a lot of people have had occasional encounters with the Bible
- and for all of us here today that is certainly the case

Generally I find people who have ever read a part of the Bible fall into three groups

- there are those who believe the Bible is God's word and try to read it
- there are people who are not sure what they think about the Bible but don't read it
- and then there are people, who in one way or another encounter the Bible
- this morning, we are all in the situation of encountering the Bible
- and if we come with an open mind can encounter it with the steps of

- I READING
- II REFLECTION
- III REVELATION
- IV RESPONSE

So, having been to Jerusalem on a religious pilgrimage, the high ranking official was:

I READING

‘And heard a man reading Isaiah the prophet’

The fact that the Ethiopian official was reading part of the Bible

- might not seem extraordinary to us
- when I was in Switzerland in 1992 I met a young woman on the train
- she was reading from the Bible, though silently not out loud
- this is probably not an unusual sight on commuter trains with people travelling
- but it was extraordinary for the Ethiopian official to be reading part of the Bible
- he was reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah
- which would have been difficult for him, as a non-Jew, to get
- maybe he had picked it up in Jerusalem on his recent visit
- it was not at all unusual for him to be reading aloud, this was quite normal
- but it enabled Philip to hear what he was reading
- Isaiah 56 has lots to say about eunuchs, foreigners and the promises of God
- But as he is reading Isaiah 53 perhaps he has not got that far yet
- Another extraordinary thing about the Ethiopian is that he is willing to be taught
- By Philip, someone of a different ethnic, religious and, no doubt, social group

I wonder if I can encourage everyone to take a brave step with me and read the Bible

- We have already heard it read aloud but we can take Bibles into our hands
- I want to encourage everyone to engage with the Bible – not only in church
- But also at home, so that you can really come to terms with its message
- You might decide it is the biggest load of rubbish of all time
- But at least that was your decision and not something someone else told you
- Today, we’re just looking at a short part from Acts 8:26-40, 15 verses

Just recently I had a real answer to prayer

- In January 1997 I was due to go on a special trip for ministers to Israel
- I was really looking forward to it but in the days immediately after Christmas
- When the weather was really cold and there had been a lot of snow in Wales
- I had eleven funerals in 10 days and the stress and twisting in and out of the car
- Had caused me to have the most awful sciatica all the way down my right leg
- With that horrible tingling pain right down to my toes
- I decided that I would go privately to see an osteopath
- I went on the Tuesday but it was no help at all, on the Friday we tried a different one
- This was a young woman osteopath from Hornchurch, Essex, Joanne
- As I was lying on her table, I saw a new red Bible on her shelf and remarked on it
- ‘I see you have a Bible on your shelf’
- ‘Yes,’ Joanne replied, ‘I have been married three years and I thought
- If ever I have a baby I would like to have that baby Christened or baptised

- But then I thought to myself, “Joanne, you hypocrite
- You would want to have your baby baptised but you have not even got a Bible”
- So I went out and bought that one’ (and a rather nice one it was too)
- Now this conversation was taking place while I was having my bones crunched
- I said to her, ‘and how did you get on reading it?’
- ‘Not too well,’ she replied
- ‘I know what you did, you started reading at Genesis and it was not too bad
- moved on to Exodus and it was more difficult but manageable
- got to Leviticus and gave up’.
- ‘That’s it exactly,’ she said, ‘how did you know?’
- ‘Everybody does that. Tell you what. Start reading Luke’s gospel
- and when I come to see you again we can talk about how you are getting on
- The deal was done and I went for four or five further appointments
- Managed to get to Israel and had a really good time
- At Easter I had a letter from Joanne telling me she had become a Christian
- And after a bit of shopping around had joined a local church

I said to God, “why do you have to send me to witness to the osteopath?”

- “I know I haven’t got much hair but can’t you just send me to the hairdresser?”
- my little Michael, who is now nine years old, used to have his hair cut by a woman
- by she moved on and was replaced by a new hairdresser
- he wasn’t too sure about the new one but he went to her while I went to my usual man
- however, last time I went to have my hair cut my usual man was not there
- so I went to Michael’s lady hairdresser – and you know how hairdressers like to chat
- I thought – now, until she takes that mirror and shows me the back,
- This is much less painful than witnessing to the osteopath

The evangelistic journey often includes talking to the enquirer about the Bible

- The Ethiopian is riding in his smart chariot
- And Philip is commanded to stay alongside it, perhaps having to run to keep up
- He hears the Ethiopian reading aloud (presumably in Hebrew)

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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.

(Acts 8:32-33)

‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ asked Philip

- His question does not translate well from the language of the Greek New Testament
- But in American English we can get the sense of it
- Philip asks him *ginoskeis ha anaginoskeis* – a play on words
- We can catch that in American English ‘do you read what you are reading?’
- As in the American use of ‘do you read me’ meaning ‘hear’ or ‘understand’
- As in a radio message ‘I read you loud and clear’ meaning ‘I understand’
- Philip asks ‘do you read what you are reading?’
- ‘how can I ... unless someone explains it to me?’ He said.

II REFLECTION

‘How can I ... unless someone explains it to me?’

Philip’s ministry to the Ethiopian official was especially arranged by God

- I have a hunch – to be fair, only a hunch, that God arranges such times for us all
- This meeting was worked out in all its details
- The Ethiopian was prepared for the meeting, Philip was prepared for the meeting
- The Ethiopian had an open mind and Philip was ready to tell of his Lord

There is no evidence that anyone before New Testament times thought of the Messiah

- In terms of this passage – a suffering servant
- Now Philip has a unique opportunity to tell the Ethiopian
- The Christian understanding of this passage

As an aside, we should note that today the priority of personal witness has been lost

- Evangelism becomes something done by experts – all very complicated
- But evangelism (like riding a bicycle) cannot really be taught
- You just have to get on and do it – sometimes falling off along the way
- The great preachers of the early church were personal evangelists
- But much of the evangelism in the early church was done by ordinary people
- Who shared their faith as they went – that is ‘they gossiped the gospel’
- By the power of the Holy Spirit the church grew when we told others of our faith
- When we stop telling others about Jesus no wonder the church declines
- Witness was basic to the discipleship of the men called to be fishers of men
- Through his obedience, Philip is led into an evangelistic situation
- How often do we miss the opportunities because we do not take the first step
- We need Spirit-led witness every bit as much as we need Spirit-led worship
- Obedience releases the Spirit into our lives and transforms us into witness for Jesus

His reading, his reflection prepared him for

III REVELATION

(Philip) ‘told him the good news about Jesus.’

When the prophet was speaking about the lamb to the slaughter

- In his humiliation he was deprived of justice - he was speaking about Jesus (Lk 22:37)
- The Bible does not tell us exactly what Philip said but we can take an informed guess
- For the death of Jesus upon the cross was just that, like a lamb to the slaughter
- Jesus was condemned to death by the religious authorities for telling the truth
- And condemned to death by the Roman civil authorities
- Even though the governor had concluded that there was no case to answer
- We cannot be entirely sure how Philip proceeded but we can take an informed guess
- Jesus was the promised Messiah or Saviour
- The death of Jesus was part of God’s plan
- God raised him from the dead as he promised he would
- The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved by the apostles
- Jesus is glorified now and for ever
- All must repent and believe

Humanly speaking, there is an inexplicable power in the Word of God

- When it is appropriately presented to spiritually hungry people
- The Bible has wise and relevant things to say but the great theme is Jesus
- Jesus: suffering servant, Jesus: Lamb of God, Jesus: risen Lord, Jesus: coming King
- Regardless of where you start in the Bible – this is where you must finish
- Who Jesus is and what Jesus has done is of critical importance
- Jesus is the promised Saviour – he has accomplished his saving work by dying for us
- Now he calls us all to turn from our unbelief and sins
- To a life of faith and obedience

The unjust humiliation and sufferings of the Lord's servant that the Ethiopian read about

- Is the launching pad for Philip's telling him the good news about Jesus
- This is where we learn – when Jesus died on the cross he died there for us, for me
- Why would he do that? Because I need him to do it and he loves me!
- He dies on the cross for me and instead of me, for you and instead of you
- Such a message demands a response

IV RESPONSE

'The eunuch went down in to the water and Philip baptised him'

Far too much that is presented as Christianity today is not Christianity at all

- For Christianity is responding to the good news of the love of God in Jesus
- Preaching without hoping for a response is scarcely preaching at all
- Discussions about religion, respect, courtesy, consideration and understanding
- Are good but they are not enough
- We hear a lot today about dialogue - the end of dialogue is mutual enrichment
- But the end of evangelism is a response

It is very important that we try our best to answer the questions that people ask

- But we must not miss addressing the biggest and most important question of all
- 'what will you do with Jesus Christ?'
- When Philip told the Ethiopian about Jesus, the promised Saviour, crucified and risen
- The Ethiopian made a response – there was no doubt about his genuine conversion
- Real repentance, true understanding and complete commitment
- The outward expression of the inward commitment was to be baptised
- In this the Ethiopian proclaimed his commitment to Jesus, the climax of the story

Rather like an arranged marriage – where it is considered that the parents know best

- They can scarcely make worse choices than some people make for themselves
- Infant baptism is the betrothal of a child to Jesus
- That is good but it must not divert our attention from our responsibility
- For the message of Christ is the message of the cross, his death, his resurrection
- The hope that he is coming again in glory with his eternal kingdom
- It is a message that demands
- Real repentance, true understanding and complete commitment
- the Ethiopian's conversion ends as it began stressing the special presence of God
- he read, reflected, Jesus was revealed and he responded and went on his way rejoicing