

Sermon 28th April 2024 (DC)

In it Together

Acts 8 v26-40 John 15 v1-8

- Just been singing about us as individuals and a church being the hands of God now because he has NOW no physical presence on earth as Jesus
- Want to develop this theme of the deep and intimate working relationship between God and mankind through examining our two readings
- Great readings chosen in lectionary – diary of readings taking us through the year
- Still in Easter but preparing for the period after Christ ascends into heaven and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church at Pentecost
- The reading about the vine is Jesus' early teaching to his disciples about the inclusiveness of us in him and him in us as body of Christ.
- The reading on the Ethiopian Official is illustrative of us working together with Christ, him preparing the ground and us being involved in securing the outcome.
- **Body of Christ is not a passive worshipping body of believers declaring a faith formula, not mere mortals.....**
- **.....Actually people spiritually equipped by God, called to be doing his work with him in building his Kingdom**
- Want first to look at our first reading page xxxxx
- My second most favourite passage of scripture. After Paul telling Timothy not to let people put him down because of his age.
- Why favourite - Fantastic Model of or for Evangelism – remind I stand here doing the sermon today - not as Lay Reader with the job of delivering services and preaching sermons, but as a Lay Evangelist. My spiritual heart is not here in church but is outside the church. For me building the Kingdom of God is about how we make that kingdom alive and desirable to those who don't know about it. They just don't know what they are missing out on if they don't know Christ.
- I'm not a pint half empty man about the society around us. Yep, there is much evil (including within the church as some of us know from Safeguarding training). But also immense goodness too. COVID Connect Buddies experience. Also there is no lack of spirituality ...but making it up yourself as one goes along or misled. In crisis very few don't shout out in prayer - they just don't know who or what they are praying to.
- First reading addresses this issue of undirected spirituality.

- In the very first verse of reading v 26, God is at work – sent an angel messenger to Philip – because he knows there’s a specific job required to be done. Philip hears and is obedient.
- He goes and stands by the road not knowing what he is there for and what will happen. But he’s gone there.
- First lesson for us is – How do we recognise and hear the angel – would we be obedient without knowing why we are being sent?
- Ties in with Paul Wright’s message last week about us doing nothing if we always wait to be fully prepared and in full knowledge before we do anything. Listen and be obedient – not all-knowing.
- Philip gets on with it...but doesn’t know what ‘it’ is.
- And then we find the Ethiopian. A pretty important official - well above Philip’s station in life, but already on a faith journey. God has been preparing his heart, he is becoming spiritually aware. This story is already about both God and Philip being in joint action bringing the Ethiopian to the true faith.
- And more instruction from God via the Holy Spirit – v29 v 26 go to that chariot and stay near it.. Not go and harangue the Ethiopian about being saved, but rather ‘be there...be alongside’.
- Being alongside, Philip can hear him reading Isaiah, so can now know what it is that is at the forefront of the Ethiopian’s mind and can ask the question, Do you understand? A call for permission to engage in conversation.
- Being alongside is the fundamental point of our Connect @ St Paul’s programme.
- To which the Ethiopian invites him into the chariot. This concept of invitation to share is so important to evangelism. Not the trait of doorstep evangelism or street corner harangue – both of which I suspect are counterproductive in our culture.
- And so the conversation begins with Philip’s knowledge of the scriptures and his knowledge of the resurrection.
- And to finish, we see no hesitation in baptising the Ethiopian there and then – why wait and Philip is whisked off by the Holy Spirit – no doubt leaving a sightly dumbfounded Ethiopian in his chariot to continue home alone.
- Apart from the model of evangelism for us the message has to be how Philip is working obediently as part of God’s plan – and God’s actions in preparing the Ethiopian for human intervention on his behalf by Philip. This working in tandem is part of our journey and also the Ethiopian’s.
- Our Vision statement? ‘Growing Together In Christ – one step at a time’ here is someone at the start of a journey with someone together with him before he even realised he was on that journey

- But that's not the end of the story - for this is where our second reading page xxxxxx cuts in. Here the words of Christ explain more fully the fundamental relationship between God and man working together in bearing fruit.
- Some would say this passage about the Vine is more about culling the unproductive Christian and how you can't survive alone outside the church.
- Certainly not the way I choose to interpret it. I think it is all about how we become part of Christ's post-resurrectional body on earth. That a Christian life is fully entwined with the work of Christ today.
- When Jesus says he is the Vine, he is talking about being the totality of the plant, roots, leaves, fruit, branches . A plant well known to his listeners at that time.
- The astounding thing is he is saying is that we are part of him.... The totality of the vine is him – and as branches we are part of him....and we must remain as part of him in order to bear his fruit.
- Cut a branch off and it's no longer part of the vine and will die and wither – pretty self-evident for experts like me with my six vines of which only three survived despite my pruning – But I prune in love for the vine, to make it strong and productive, not out of condemnation of the weaker or too numerous shoots.
- Put these two readings together and we begin to see that as followers of Christ we are inseparable from him and must always reflect on earth his qualities and purpose if we are to bear fruit. We are part of his journey, as much as him being part of ours. We have to be Christlike in our journey and the journeys of others.
- Always like to preach towards a hymn. And in selecting one, I think God put on my heart the good old Ethiopian Official, full of joy after discovering Christ and being baptised - but Philip was whisked away by the spirit, what happened next to the Ethiopian Official back alone in his chariot. Was he a lone branch or part of the vine which must always have many branches to bear fruit.
- And it takes me back to our vision statement - 'Growing Together In Christ – one step at a time' And we can see the Ethiopian, that new Christian taking first steps of a journey, heart prepared by God and Philip willingly and obediently engaged by God to be his hands, his eyes and his explaining voice on earth.
- And the we hear the story of the Vine, constantly and lovingly tended and pruned, for us to bear fruit by being the branches, that we are in him and he in us. This is him nurturing us and we, being like him, nurturing each other in his name, being like him in what we say and do.
- This is about nurturing the new believer and indeed each other throughout our journeys

- Of being Christlike and serving all those around us.
- Song to conclude these words– the words and sentiments are spot on. About being Christlike because God is in us and about us seeing him in those around us too.
- When we get to last verse – repeat of first - why not turn to those around you, people you know or who you don't, someone at the start of a faith journey or even in the later years of it; let's look each other in the eye with Christian love and care and sing those words of true fellowship, giving and receiving - Christlike.

Brother, sister let me serve you.
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.

- Let's stand and sing to conclude this talk. Amen