**Sermon by The Revd Colin Hurford, Annscroft 2nd May 2021 Easter 5.**

**Acts 8.26-40, John 15.1-8.**

**“Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go towards the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”**

Philip goes and is directed to the Ethiopian who is reading the prophet Isaiah, not unusual as there were thriving Jewish colonies in the area from which he came and people were attracted to the Jewish faith without necessarily going the whole way and becoming converts. The Ethiopian, being a high official, would have been able to afford his own copy of Isaiah. Philip listens to God, does what he is told and finds that God has already prepared the Ethiopian to receive the truth about Jesus. A very fruitful result!

I wonder how many of you have heard God speaking in some way or other? Two years ago, I wrote an article in the magazine about how God speaks to us. If you would like to reread it, there are two or three copies at the back of the church. I didn’t give any present day examples of angels speaking but I did give examples of the Holy Spirit speaking, especially through putting thoughts into a person’s mind. Could what Philip did happen today? A friend of mine once told the group we were in, about walking along a promenade by the sea with a Christian companion who very much had gifts of the spirit. They noticed a young woman sitting on one of the benches. The friend’s companion went up to her and told her she needed Jesus in her life! My friend cringed with embarrassment but it turned out that the young woman was desperate about what she should do and the suggestion was exactly what she needed. I wouldn’t dare do anything like that, but the Christian who approached her, had listened to the prompting of the Holy Spirit with a result very much like that in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian.

But now I want to leave the story of Philip for a moment and look at the Gospel reading which has stupendous challenges. Jesus says “I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you.” Other translations have “dwell in me”, “remain in me” or even “live in me” as in the the chorus of the hymn “The Lord of the dance.” If we do believe in Jesus and try to follow him, then he actually lives in us. Which means, and I don’t think we fully realise this, that as we meet others, we take Jesus with us. People don’t see Jesus Himself but they see Jesus through us - and that means they see God through us! Some of you may think - “That is going too deep for me, I’m not especially devout or holy”. But God doesn’t need us to be that. He simply wants us to be ourselves and so to show Jesus through us. As we go into a room or the shop - we take Jesus with us.

But then, in the reading from John, comes another hard saying. The Father prunes us so we may be more fruitful. I can’t say I like the idea of God snipping away at me but if I follow Jesus I have to accept it. Another little story. A man who was a very heavy smoker became a Christian. Some of his fellow Christians thought they ought to tell him to stop smoking. Fortunately they didn’t as it might have put him off being a Christian. After a while, the person simply felt God was gently telling him to stop smoking - and he did without too much difficulty. An example of God ’s pruning? Not all that long ago, I was getting very angry with the Government’s lack of compassion for black people, especially Priti Patel when it suddenly came to me through reading a book and through my prayers - stop criticising you’re only putting more anger on to her - start praying for her. Was that God pruning? God does want us to enter more and more fully into His Kingdom and that is a kingdom of love. So he has to remove things that prevent us being part of the Kingdom.

There is another absolutely challenging saying which I simply haven’t come to terms with. Jesus continued, “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask what you will and it will be done for you.” I, and no doubt you, have experienced many answers to prayer, but also many prayers that haven’t been answered and I am struggling with this phrase “Ask what you will” still seeking an answer.

But, to come back to Philip. Obviously a person who bore much fruit - before he met the Ethiopian he had a wonderful ministry in Samaria including many healings. It is clear that Jesus lived in him very fully. So what about us? Let us try to remember that Jesus does live in us and ask Him to come more and more fully into our lives, perhaps starting with this service as we receive his very life through the bread and wine of Communion.

The Rev’d Colin Hurford