

Fools for Jesus!

Acts 8: 1-8, 26-40

Fools for Christ is a well worn statement which we like to trot out almost as much as 'I rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.' (Psalm 84:10) yet both need to be taken a lot more seriously. The doorkeeper ministry is crucial to being a radically welcoming Jesus shaped Body of Christ and crucial as well for protecting the flock & the Greek word idiotēs (for which we get 'fools for Christ') is the descriptive verb for those scattered by the persecution following Stephen's death. Believe it or not, doorkeepers and fools make for dynamic growing churches and maybe today Jesus is calling you to such ministry?

In our journey through Acts we have seen how Stephen & now Philip don't remain deacons but graduate to the role of preaching evangelists and perform signs and wonders paving the way for the gentile mission. Today we focus on Philip's bold evangelisation of the Samaritans (heretical outsiders) and an Ethiopian leader (found on the extreme boundary of the known world in the hot south).

The whole chapter (do read it all) underlines for us that there can be no evangelism without the evangel (good news), and that evangelism presupposes the gospel of grace centred totally on Jesus. Effective evangelism becomes possible only when the Church recovers both the biblical gospel and a joyful confidence in its truth, relevance and power. In the first four verses Luke sets the scene for the evangelistic exploits of Philip beginning with this statement: *and Saul was there giving approval to his death.*

Luke appears to be drawing our attention to a 3 fold cause and effect, First Stephens martyrdom brought a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem: it began 'on that day' and it broke out with the ferocity of a sudden storm.

True, not every inhabitant of the city was in opposition, for there were 'godly men' who buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, deploring the injustice of his death. They will have taken considerably personal risk by thus identifying with Stephen (perhaps they were the same much impacted pall bearers as in Acts 5). In contrast, Saul, who had approved of Stephen's stoning, now began to destroy the Church. The Greek: *lumaino* expresses 'a brutal and sadistic cruelty'. 'Making a house-to-house search for believers, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.' Not only did he not spare the women but also he did not stop short of seeking and securing his victims death (9:1, 22:4, 26:10). Saul of Tarsus had blood on his hands, for several others followed Stephen into martyrdom.

Secondly the great persecution led to a great dispersion: 'all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Luke clearly connects this with Acts 1:8 "You shall be my martyrs" and sees the work of the Spirit in sending his people out to the ends of the earth via the persecution.

Stephen's message had been truly prophetic: Jerusalem and the temple now begin to fade from view, as Jesus calls his people out and accompanies them. No blame is attached to the apostles for staying behind. Jerusalem would still for a while be the HQ of the new Christian Community and they evidently saw it as their duty to remain there, and the persecution could well have been directed more against the Hellenists like Stephen than the Hebraists like them.

Thirdly, if Stephen's martyrdom led to persecution, and the persecution to the dispersion, the dispersion now resulted in worldwide evangelism. The scattering of the good seed of the gospel followed the scattering of the Christians. For 'those who had been scattered ', as they fled, far from going into hiding, or even maintaining a prudential silence, 'preached the

word wherever they went'. Up to this point it was the apostles who had given the lead in evangelism, in defiance of the Sanhedrin's ban, violence and threats, now however as the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, it was the whole church that took up the evangelistic task. Not that they all become preachers or missionaries as a full time vocation. "Preaching the word" is misleading: the Greek expression does not necessarily mean more than 'shared the good news'. Philip was soon to preach to the Samaritan crowds (v6); it is better to think of these as 'nameless amateur missionaries' (Michael Green): idiots: fools for Jesus!

What is plain is that the devil (who lurks behind all persecution of the church) over reached himself. His attack had the opposite effect to what was intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution only succeeded in spreading it. The wind increases the flame. The modern parallel is in 1949 when the communists beat the nationalists in China and 636 CIM missionaries were obliged to leave. It seemed a total disaster. Yet within 4 years 286 of them were redeployed in S E Asia and Japan, while the Christians in China, even under sever persecution began to multiply and now total 100 times the number there were when the missionaries left!!

Luke goes on to give us two examples of early Christian evangelism, in both Philip was the chief player. He may have obtained the facts from Philip himself, for about 20 years later he stayed in his home in Caesarea (21:8).

I have chosen to concentrate on the second example: v 5-8 clearly records the success of Philips mission, which brought much joy to the City and established a large Church. But when the Lord called Philip to move from the comfort of a large City Church to the discomfort of one to one evangelism in the desert Philip immediately obeys and goes leaving all behind. David Watson in the preface to his book called:

Discipleship quotes a communist: How can anyone believe in the supreme value of this gospel if you do not practise it, if you do not spread it, and if you sacrifice neither time nor money for it? We believe in our communist message, and we are ready to sacrifice everything, even our life. But you people are afraid to soil your hands.' Until Christians in the UK are prepared to step outside their comfort zones and obediently follow Christ's direction and call we will not see the Church in the UK growing again. Philip obediently went to the desert and the rest is history!

So what has the encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch got to teach us: in a word? Obedience. Either he is Lord of All is He is not Lord at all. Philip's obedience resulted to the connection of the right person at the right time with the right message: the birth of the Ethiopian Church and the transformation of a nation was the consequence.

Philip's second and rather less glamorous assignment from the Lord began when an Angel spoke to him: would we realise if an Angel spoke to us? Are we open to God moving by His spirit supernaturally: I hope so.

Philip was obedient to the Holy Spirit who lead Him every step of the way to the:

1. Right Person: A God fearer (27), a seeker (28), Honest and open (30/31) and someone who meant business with God (36). The Holy Spirit had already been at work in him.
2. Right Time: he was reading Isaiah 53 and wondering (30/31). Spirit-led personal evangelism is knowing when to speak and when to keep silent.
3. Right Message: he asked a relevant question and Philip answered him. We need to have a good working knowledge of our Bibles.
4. Right Ministry: Philip's approach was spirit-filled and evangelistic.

Philip was confident in his identity in Christ and was happy being himself: the spirit had moulded his personality, he was centred in Jesus and took the opportunities the Lord gave him. He had learnt to hear the Saviour's voice. He also was not religious!

As a result he was able to find favour right at the top of the social tree with this high official in the Ethiopian government and to speak out without fear. As a result the Ethiopian was soundly converted and baptised, and Philip went on his way rejoicing (39)!!

Philip's abiding legacy to the Body of Christ is his gift to combine change (in relation to his contexts and methods: Samaritan cities or desert roads) and changelessness (in relation to the gospel of grace itself), together with the wisdom and grace to discern between them.

Add to this the clear evidence of the Early Church that did not leave believers in their comfort-zone but always called them on to new exploits and adventures in mission for Jesus. Believers in our generation seem to take refuge in the big comfortable city churches only to express the desire to get out there and hence are surprised and thrilled when a missionary opportunity like Street Pastors comes along. But somehow I don't think we are called to rest in the proverbial spiritual rut. The Lord of the Church wants you and me at the sharp end always living on the edge in the poured out church and having to trust Jesus every step of the way. I don't know about you but I would rather be in that place any day than comfortable in a Church, which has become more institution than Body of Christ. In the coming weeks the challenge will be there for us all to become more active in our discipleship: not just receiving but giving us well, and so when I ask you to disciple a new or younger believer I trust that you see it as a great opportunity to fulfil the Great Commission and return to

active service for Jesus. And if the Lord gives you like Philip a key convert to nurture and care for, do it well, for it could result in a whole nation transformed by the *Gospel of Grace*.

Pastor David

July 22nd 2012.