

## Sermon - 3rd Mark of Mission: loving service

Based on Acts 8.26-42

### Our parish's Mission Action Team's responsibility

- Before we look at today's Scripture reading in the context of the Third Mark of Mission, I want to share what our parish's new Mission Action Team are engaged with - because it is closely linked.
- Firstly, our Mission Action Team are representing and working on behalf of the whole parish.
- The team is not separate from the parish, and they are not working on their own program - no, they are *part* of the parish, and they are working on the *parish's* program.
- They are the representatives who are leading the parish in participating in the Diocesan Parish Renewal Program.
- The Diocesan Program is a resource of coaching, and training, and guidance, to enable us to undertake an intentional revitalisation of our parish life - something that is good for all church communities to do from time to time.
- Of course, we are not just entering into this in our own strength, or depending just on the Diocesan resources, but are doing so with prayer, because we need the Spirit's ongoing wisdom, guidance, and encouragement - just like in today's story where the apostle Philip was dependent on the Spirit's wisdom, guidance, and encouragement.

### Our Team's first assignment

- Now, in addition to prayer, our Mission Action Team's first assignment is to discern which demographic group of people we need to intentionally be coming alongside next - just like Philip was led by the Spirit to come alongside the Ethiopian eunuch.
- Here at St John's we are spoilt for choice, because we have a number of different groups of people who normally come onto our church property every week: we have AA, AI Anon, and NA groups meeting here, we have two groups who enjoy community meals here, we have families attending the Kindergarten on site, and next door at Croydon Centro there are not only the hundreds of regular customers but also all the shopping centre staff who might value our quiet sacred space during their time off.
- And so the Team is prayerfully and thoughtfully working through a process of discernment to understand who God wants us - as a parish community - to reach out to first, in a respectful and intentional way.
- It might be a group from the list I've already given - or it might be some other group.
- And we will be communicating this with everyone when we have made this discernment.
- Of course, ideally we would want to be reaching out to all of these groups.
- But we can learn from Philip's story, where the Spirit led him to speak intentionally to only one person at that particular time.
- We need to recognise the value of having one focus to begin with.

### What do we expect?

- The next important point about being intentionally engaged in the ongoing missional ministry of Christ is adjusting our expectations.
- Are we expecting to connect with a group of people, and then expect them to immediately join in with our Sunday services? - at least, when we get back to having services with everyone in the church space again.
- To follow our order of service, sing our hymns, sign up to our rosters for readers, and cleaners, and flower arrangers?

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- In short, are we expecting to strike up conversations, tell them what Jesus is doing in our lives - and what Jesus can do for them, and then *get* them into our church space so that they can be just like us?
- If this is what we expect from any missional engagement, then we need to make some serious adjustments to these expectations.
- And this is where the story of Philip's missional engagement with the eunuch is very instructive.

### Starting and continuing with prayer

- There are a number of points from this story that apply directly to any missional engagement we undertake.
- It starts with an angel of the Lord directing Philip.
- Whenever Bible stories describe angels interacting personally with people in this way, it is inevitably understood to be resulting from prayerful personal conversations between those people and God.
- Prayer - ongoing conversation between us and God - is an essential aspect of missional work.
- And as Philip responded, so he was directed further.
- He sees the treasurer of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, and the Spirit instructs him further.
- This is a good reminder that when we engage in missional work, we don't just pray at the start.
- We need to keep praying, and keep ensuring that we are in ongoing dialogue with God's Spirit - and not just as individuals, but as a community as well.

### Philip's attitude towards the eunuch

- In the story there is some respectful dialogue: Philip doesn't just hop into the chariot and start telling the eunuch what he, Philip, thinks he should think or do.
- Rather, he comes alongside the eunuch, and waits to be invited into his personal space.
- All too often when we want to help people in need, we are tempted to take control of their situation.
- Or we are tempted to assume that because they are in an undignified situation, that they don't need to be treated with dignity.
- Philip could have had the same attitude towards the eunuch for many reasons: because he was a foreigner, he was someone whose sexuality was abnormal, he was apparently not well educated - or at least, seemingly less educated than Philip.
- But Philip has an attitude of respect, even while he engages in conversation with the eunuch, waiting to be invited to sit beside him.
- Which the eunuch does.

### The power of God's Word

- They then explore the passage of Scripture from Isaiah together.
- And this is where God's Word speaks powerfully into the eunuch's situation.
- And it is useful to use the New International Version to understand better the question from the Isaiah quote: *'Who can describe his generation?'* (Acts 8.33, NRSV)
- The NIV translates this as *'Who can speak of his descendants?'* (Acts 8.33, NIV)
- So the eunuch asks: "Is Isaiah speaking about me, or about someone else?"
- And this is really important, because the description about the person who has no voice that is heard, who was humiliated, who was denied justice, and who has no descendants - is the description of the eunuch's own situation.
- People who were eunuchs at that time were often those who had been captured as youngsters, castrated against their will, and were obliged to serve in order to live, as they could have no family of their own to support them.

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- So the eunuch is wanting to know who Isaiah was speaking of, whose circumstances were similar to his own.
- And Philip is able to show him that it was God, incarnated in his Son Jesus, whose voice was likewise not heard, who was humiliated, who was denied justice, who had no descendants.
- And who thus had effectively shared in the eunuch's own situation.
- Jesus wasn't there to change his situation and reverse the eunuch's castration, but was in the situation with the eunuch, giving him God's peace, and love and comfort.

### Accompanying the eunuch

- God's Word spoke so powerfully to the eunuch that he wanted to enter tangibly into that relationship between Jesus and our heavenly Father.
- And so he asks Philip to baptise him in a pool - perhaps merely a puddle - of water beside the road.
- And Philip, who has been accompanying the eunuch on his journey, then accompanies the eunuch into the water, and, after baptism, out of the water again.
- Philip shares in both the physical journey and the spiritual journey of the eunuch.
- And not on his, Philip's terms, but on the eunuch's terms.
- What a powerful lesson for us in missional etiquette, for our own expectations about how God might use our respectful coming alongside others, using our accompanying of others on their journeys - their life journeys, their emotional journeys, their spiritual journeys.
- Instead of Philip expecting the eunuch to be where Philip was, he was open to being where the eunuch was.
- Likewise, when we engage missionally with others, do we expect them to be with us, or do we expect ourselves to be with them?

### Missional success

- And there is an amusing irony at the end.
- If we were being missionally minded like Philip, wouldn't we then measure our missional success by seeing how many 'Ethiopian eunuchs' (as it were) we were adding to our congregation - to our parish directory - to our electoral roll?
- We might look at the eunuch who was in charge of the queen's *entire* treasury, and think to ourselves: just imagine how having him in the congregation will improve our balance sheet.
- But what happens?
- Philip is sent off to evangelise elsewhere, and the eunuch disappears back to Ethiopia!
- I think that if we experienced something like that here, we might regard our missional activity as a failure.
- But if we had that attitude, then I think we'd be missing the fundamental point, and we'd probably be missing how God was nevertheless blessing us in such circumstances.
- Because the fundamental point is that we would be doing the work of God: both by bringing, and being, the Good News to others, and enabling God's love to transform the lives of others.
- In short, we would be helping to extend God's kingdom on earth.
  
- Furthermore, we might well find that God was blessing us unexpectedly.
- Philip would have known great blessing in that experience, and his faith life would have been enriched and strengthened.
- And, if I'd been there at the time, I would have wanted to join in with Philip myself.
- I would have said to him: 'What an adventure! Can I join in with you?'

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- Our missional success should not necessarily be measured by how many converts we get into our church space, but rather by the lives that have been transformed by love, and the people who then want to join in with us, in sharing this transformational love.

### Praying for the Mission Action Team

- So in ending this sermon I want to return to our Mission Action Team's first assignment, of discerning which group we understand God is asking us to come alongside, and pray for this discernment.

Heavenly Father, as you sent your angel to guide Philip,  
and through your Spirit helped him to discern the eunuch's need for his companionship:  
likewise guide our Mission Action Team - Cathy, Shamindra, Meryl, Stuart, Craig, John and myself -  
as we discern who it is that we, as a parish, need to come alongside next,  
so that we can accompany them on their journey,  
and be active participants in your transformational love,  
so that your kingdom may be extended in the wider community;  
we pray this in the power of your Spirit, through your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.