

## 2020-07-19 – Acts 8:1-40 – Philip the Evangelist

The tallest bridge in the world, with a structural height of over 1000 feet is the Millau Viaduct, crossing the gorge valley of the Tarn near Millau in Southern France. This multi-span cable-stayed bridge costing nearly 400 million euros was completed in 2004 and has been consistently ranked as one of the greatest engineering achievements of all time.

I have to admit to being quite interested in impressive bridges. And where would we be without them? It is easy to take the ease with which we cross rivers, roads and ravines for granted. But there is a much more important bridge that is often overlooked. The story of the Bible – the gospel message – is about the building of a bridge between heaven and earth. As a result of our rebellion against God, a gap opened up between humans and the source of all goodness, a gap that no human effort or ingenuity can bridge. The mission of Jesus is – as the hymn ‘Love Divine’ puts it – about the joy of heaven to earth come down. God comes to us in Jesus, to open the way to heaven. Jesus creates the bridge across which we can travel to find perfect, eternal peace and fulfilment with God.

But Jesus does his bridge-building work through his people whom he equips with his Spirit, to be bridge builders. Philip is one such bridge builder, and an example and inspiration to all of us.

We pick up the story of Acts just after persecution of the church breaks out.

As a result of the persecution of the young Church that resulted in the death, as we heard last week, of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the first Christians were scattered, and took with them and shared with those they came across their faith in Jesus.

Persecution did to the Church what wind does to seed: it scatters it and leads to a greater harvest. The word *diaspeiro* translated ‘scattered’ in verse 1 and 4 means “to scatter seed”. The believers in Jerusalem were God’s seed, and the persecution was used by God to plant them in new soil so they could bear fruit.

Philip was one such fruitful seed, planted in the unfamiliar soil of Samaria, where people were part Jew and part Gentile. Like Stephen, Philip has been appointed as one of seven deacons with responsibility for caring for the poor, and grew in

his ministry to become an effective evangelist, in other words ones who shares good news.

Philip is described as proclaiming the Christ, or more literally, heralding God’s King. The response that people have to a herald is very important, and they can either reject or accept the coming king.

And Philip’s message fell on receptive soil in Samaria, where many people put their faith in King Jesus, and as a result many were delivered from physical affliction, demonic control, and, most important, from their sins. And as a result great joy was in that city. Joy is one of the evidences of true conversion. Joy is experienced by those as a bit of heaven comes to earth across the bridge of the gospel.

This was a significant moment in the history of salvation. Jesus had said that his apostles were to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8b), and now the gospel reaches Samaria. So significant is this development, that two of the apostles, Peter and John, needed to come from Jerusalem and put their hands on the converts in order for them to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus had promised to all believers. This is not the usual pattern (which is to receive the Holy Spirit as soon as one believes)<sup>1</sup>, but was necessary to unite the Samaritan believers with the original Jewish church in Jerusalem. God did not want two churches that would perpetuate the division and conflict that had existed for centuries. Jesus had given Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 16:13–20), which meant that Peter had the privilege of “opening the door of faith” to others. He opened the door to the Jews at Pentecost, and now he opened the door to the Samaritans. Later, as we will hear about in two weeks’ time, he would open the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

The ministry of Philip was that of a bridge builder between two previously estranged people – the Jews and Samaritans – but now made one in Christ. And soon, by the ministry of another, God would extend that bridge to the Gentiles and include them as well.

Philip stepped out of his comfort zone, crossing religious and social barriers to share the good news that Jesus is Lord, that people might know the freedom and joy of salvation. We are all called sometimes to step out of our comfort zones

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<sup>1</sup> The first ten chapters of Acts record a period of transition, from the Jew to the Samaritan to the Gentile. God’s pattern for today is given in Acts 10: the sinner hears the Gospel, believes, receives the gift of the Spirit, and then is baptized. It is dangerous to base any doctrine or practice only on what is recorded in Acts 1–10, for you might be building on that which was temporary and transitional. Those who claim we must be baptized to receive the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38) have a hard time explaining what happened to the Samaritans; and those who claim we must have “the laying

of hands” to receive the Spirit have a difficult time with Acts 10. Once you accept Acts 1–10 as a transitional period in God’s plan, with Acts 10 being the climax, the problems are solved.

with the love of God, as the Good Samaritan did, and to share Jesus, the Bread of Life, with those who are spiritually hungry.

Even today, we need “bridge builders” like Philip, men and women who will carry the Gospel into pioneer territory and dare to challenge the well-established prejudices, whether they be about race, class, or whatever, to take the love of God to all the world, the Gospel to every creature.

Following the high-profile, successful ministry that Philip has in Samaria, he is led to a very different situation. God guides us in a number of different ways. He speaks authoritatively through his word, the Bible, and we shall hear a bit more about this shortly. He guides through the circumstances we find ourselves, through the wise counsel of others, and our own common sense. But God often guides us through the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Sensitive to the leading of God’s Spirit, Philip obediently travels along a desert road and there meets his God-arranged appointment with a high-ranking Ethiopian official.

God has similar appointments planned for you. Maybe not with high-ranking officials, but according to Ephesians 2:10, Christians are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”. God fills each of our diaries with encounters, tasks, projects, opportunities to serve him, to be part of his masterplan which is bringing about his kingdom. Each of us have a unique set of gifts and opportunities to serve God; we just need to be open to discovering them and having the courage to act as God guides us. God in his wisdom chooses to act through normal, frail humans like you and me!

Philip made the long, dangerous journey and had an encounter that changed the life of an important man, that must have had knock-on effect to untold others. The Spirit of God prompted and equipped Philip, and the same Spirit was also at work in the heart of this man, who was already a worshipper of God as a Jewish proselyte, but who had not heard about Jesus. God uses Philip to bridge the gap in the man’s understanding and allow him to come to faith.

The man is reading from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah but doesn’t understand what he is reading. This is not an unusual experience! Much of the Bible is clear in what it means, even to a young child, but other parts are difficult to understand and apply. But it is important to remember that the Bible is God’s gift to his Church, and to plumb its depths we need the gifts and insights that he gives to his people as a whole. We are only able to read the Bible in our own language because of the skill and labour of those who translated it for us. And our understanding of it is informed by numerous historians and theologians over

many years who have given us the context that we need to make sense of what is written. We need each other. And this man needed Philip.

And Philip started where the man was. Of course, literally Philip had to meet the man where he was, on that desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza, but also he had to connect with him intellectually and emotionally. When we are wanting to serve someone, or when a teacher is needing to explain something, we have to start with what they already know, be sensitive to their needs and emotions, genuinely listen and care. Only then should we speak.

This is not always easy, and we would often prefer another starting point. We find some people very difficult to connect with, emotionally challenging, or with a world view that is so very far from ours. But it is the approach taken by Philip, by Paul, and Jesus himself to meet people where they are, respond to the need they feel, speak in a language they understand, and so help them across that bridge towards God.

There’s a well-known joke about a tourist who asks one of the locals for directions to the capital. The local replies: ‘Well sir, if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here’. It is of course nonsense, but often is our attitude. It may not be easy, but we need to start where people are if we are to travel with them.

The Ethiopian is focused on Isaiah 53:7–8, which describes Jesus as the willing sacrifice for sinners. The idea of substitutionary sacrifice is one that is found from the beginning of the Bible to the end. God killed animals so that He might clothe Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). He provided a ram to die in the place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13). At Passover, innocent lambs died for the people of Israel (Ex. 12); and the entire Jewish religious system was based on the shedding of blood (Lev. 17, especially v. 11). Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of both the Old Testament types and the prophecies (John 1:29; Rev. 5).

Starting with this passage of scripture, Philip was able to bring light to this man’s mind and heart. Philip was able to build a bridge from what he knew to Jesus. This man needed Jesus, and having had the good seed of the gospel planted in him, responds with faith, believes and is baptised. And as with Philip’s earlier ministry, the result once again is joy.

We are all called to be bridge builders, whether as ambassadors, heralds, teachers, peace makers, and so on. And when, like Philip, we are open to and follow the leading of God’s Spirit to do the good works which he has prepared for us to do, bridges get built between heaven and earth, and amazing things can result!