

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2021 (2.05.2021)

Acts 8: 26 – end; John 15: 1 – 8

The story in the Book of Acts about Philip is gripping, exotic and inspiring stuff. It's full of action: the angel said, Get up and go, and he got up and went. Out in the middle of nowhere he meets the most wondrously unlikely of characters: the treasurer of the Ethiopian royal court. He's rich, he's influential, and he comes from a mysterious faraway place where people have different coloured skin, different that is to the Ancient Near East where the Bible is set. And the story speaks to us of the priority of being ready to answer to the faith that is in us.

I nearly said it's about the priority of evangelism. But of course that's way too scary. We all have good excuses why we can't be evangelists. It's often because we feel we're just simple Christians and we don't know enough about our faith to be able to speak about it. Well, of course, we all need to learn about our faith.

It's a life-long process that's never complete. We can never understand enough of our faith or know enough about it. We're invited all the time to find out more, and to grow closer to God. But it's a poor excuse for not letting folk know why you started coming to church, and why you keep coming to church. Simple faith is what we want. Heads stuffed full of theology aren't any good for it.

But I think this story about Philip can be a bit problematic as well, especially when read alongside the Gospel reading we've had this morning. There is a danger of a story about someone spontaneously responding to prompting by the Holy Spirit being taken as a licence for loose cannons. Alarm bells always start ringing when someone says God has told them they must do something or that something must happen. There is a danger it can be said manipulatively – even if unwittingly – and used like a trump card to stifle all opposition. Who dare argue with what God's said? Well, you might not dare argue,

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but it always raises the next question: who else has God told? When we're seeking to discern someone's calling for a particular role within the church, the affirmation by others of the person's sense of calling is always absolutely crucial. God's told me, on its own, won't wash.

The metaphor Jesus uses in this morning's Gospel reading is that he is the vine, and he goes on to say that his disciples – and that original group must now be expanded to include us – are the branches. Branches can't exist independently. They can only be defined as part of something else. Jesus doesn't say, "I am a forest, you are the trees in that forest, each standing independently in its own bit of my soil." Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." We are nourished and become fruitful by abiding in him. So there's little scope for "Doing a Philip" and going off on a frolic of your own because you've got some sort of personal hotline for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Just how we abide in Jesus, though, in contemporary society, is quite a challenge. Our culture is becoming fragmented and atomised. People don't want to abide in anything, be it political parties or trade unions, or the Rotary Club, or amateur choral societies, let alone a church. People are becoming less associational. Our friendships are increasingly conducted through social media rather meeting up with people and the pandemic has accelerated the process of change.

It has been wonderful, whilst we haven't been able to get together with friends, to be able to meet up with them through Zoom or WhatsApp video calls or whatever. But that hasn't just been a short term fix whilst government restrictions on movement have been in force. That may be the reason we've started doing it, but now our lives are changed. It's like letting the genie out of the bottle. It won't go back in now.

And of course, how we join in a church service has been through the same process. As an emergency

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response to not being able to gather in church, we have started streaming services over the internet. And that has massive implications and raises massive questions for how we abide in Jesus the way that a branch abides in a vine. The metaphor does rather break down, doesn't it? You can't put a video camera in front of a vine and start relaying a film of the vine to a branch on its own, miles away, and expect the branch suddenly to start sprouting grapes.

But that does not mean – and please, stick with me people joining from home – that does not mean that streaming is a bad thing that we must stop as soon as this crisis is over. It's not. And we can't. The genie is out of the bottle. And it won't go back in. Live streaming of worship has changed the way church operates. That is why the Priory's church council has decided that the churchwardens and I should seek legal authority to install some proper infrastructure to be able stream our worship in the long term, using the whole building, rather than having poor old Adriane

balance my mobile phone on a plant stand and restricting the conduct of our worship to these few square feet that are within shot. The official notice is pinned up outside, in case anybody wants to object to two cameras being placed in the sill of the west window, programmed in to view different scenes in the building, with discreet cabling going along routes used by existing cabling around the building.

It's exciting stuff. The future has arrived sooner than we expected. It means we are going to be able to reach people who are ill or housebound and stay in touch with new friends we've made who live too far away to travel to the Priory each Sunday. That's great.

But Jesus invites us – no, he commands us – to abide in him. I don't have any quick answers about how we do that in this new world. What I do know is that Jesus wants his joy to be in us and that our joy be complete. I'd like to think we're made more complete

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by including people online. But just how that works needs to be developed and worked through.

Amen.