

## Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Readings                      Acts 8:26-40 ([CEV](#))  
   John 15:1-8 ([CEV](#))

### Reflection

How have you shown God's love to a stranger this week?

We think of acts of kindness and they are important but the most loving act is to introduce someone to the presence of God, to help them realise they are not alone but are part of the oneness that is God.

Philip was prompted to go on the road to Gaza and it was in this unlikely place that he was led by the spirit to approach the Ethiopian's carriage. Do we pay attention to the times when we are led down unusual roads and are we open to the spirit's prompting to draw alongside folk?

Philip invited the traveller to ask a question. How well do we use the opportunities that arise in brief encounters? Philip's encounter led to commitment on the part of the Ethiopian and both went on their separate ways.

Philip shares his own personal understanding and that is what we are all called to do. What does this story say to us?

At the time this story in Acts was written about, there was a huge amount of persecution of Christians happening. Many local churches were under siege, threatened by the established religion. This persecution saw the early Church moving out from the centre to the marginalised and finding there a hunger for understanding of the scriptures. Today many churches are struggling with falling numbers and the challenges of aging, is God calling us to move onwards, to change direction and try something new? What does this story say to us?

John 15 – reminds us that we can do it the easy way or the hard way – the choice is ours, we can work with God allowing him to guide us or we can try to go it alone.

I have often wondered what question might have provoked the writer of John to come up with the answer 'I am the true vine'! One situation might have been that the early church were arguing about which was the right way and the writer of John wanted something powerful to remind them that the way of Jesus was the good way, and that it was always better to stay in touch and support one another when there were plenty of people against Christians without fighting themselves. We are one, together in God, but to be in God is to be in an evolving system of change.

If you have ever grown a vine you will know that fruit grows on the parts of the plant that are a year old, not on new wood but also not on old wood, so every year you have to prune out the wood that carried last year's fruit so that new wood will grow for next year's fruit. It is an ongoing and delicate process.

We as Christians need to prune our lives and get rid of the wood that has borne fruit and allow new wood to grow. Remaining in God is not a static thing it means journeying and

growing in new directions each year. The same is true for churches each year we must assess what has been successful but not hold on to it forever, instead we must learn from it and try something new. A healthy church is always looking for things to let go of and new things to embrace and we do it nurtured by God's love and using God's love to help one another.

At a personal level it speaks about letting go of the things that prevent us growing, prevent us reaching our full potential. Fears, worries, all become tangled up and need to be cut out to allow our life to grow. We have to remember who we really are and hold on to our dreams letting that vision shape our lives rather than the baggage we accumulate as we grow up.

There is a story about a cat and two mice. One day a cat who had ingeniously disguised himself as a squirrel came across two mice in a field. One mouse was lying on his back on the ground with his feet pointing to the sky, the other was standing on a stone holding a twig which he was pointing away from himself. Both mice looked worried. Curious the cat/squirrel asked them what they were doing. The mouse lying on his back said he had heard that sky was going to fall down and crush everything. The cat replied that was a ridiculous idea and even if it were true what difference would one mouse make. Slightly annoyed by the tone of the cat the mouse said he could hold up a little bit of the sky. The cat turned to the other mouse and asked the same question. The mouse said he had been told a terrible monster was approaching and he was standing guard. The cat laughed at the idea that the mouse could defeat a monster with a twig.

The mice told the cat they were very, very worried and he should not laugh, they had been worrying for days and were doing what they could. The cat replied that they were foolish to worry about everything they were told, especially when they had no power to change things, even if they should happen. He suggested they would be better to worry about things they knew for certain. The mice asked what sort of things was he talking about and the cat said things like cats can eat mice and he threw off his disguise.

There are few certainties in the world and yet we can get ourselves tied up in worry about things which are unlikely to happen and ignore the things that are already happening. Instead we should be fearless explorers ready to let go of things that prevent us travelling, prevent us flying.

Poem (Christopher Logue)

Come to the edge.  
We might fall.  
Come to the edge.  
It's too high.  
**COME TO THE EDGE**  
And they came  
And he pushed  
and they flew.

Letting go is scary but Jesus said 'do not be afraid'.

God is always with us, we are never alone, even when we mistakenly think we are!

In the second film of the original Star Wars Trilogy, while giving Jedi training to Luke Skywalker, Yoda says: *"Size matters not. Look at me. Judge me by my size, do you? Hmm? Hmm. And well you should not. For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is. Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you; between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere. Yes, even between the land and the ship."*

God's Spirit is our force, held in God we have amazing power but we need to trust in that power and we need to nurture our growth.

We need to have our roots in a place that will help us grow – is the church good compost? The church is us together, we share, we nurture, we encourage each other to remember, to reflect, to rebalance ourselves.

Our understanding has to evolve to enable our growth, this means we have to think deeply, talk regularly and share confidently. How can we enable that to happen?

- Start by doing this with people we know,
- encourage small house groups, discussion groups,
- embrace café style worship where we have more opportunities to talk and share,
- be a part of a group preparing worship together.

Then we have to be more aware of opportunities to engage with others -

- Smile at people
- Perhaps sit next to someone on a bench
- Ask if you can join someone at a table in a café
- Start a conversation with someone in a queue, or on the bus or train

It starts with catching their eye, recognising a mutual frustration, seeing someone reading a book you have read or a headline in a paper. As you read a story to a grandchild invite them to wonder about something in the story, the actions of a character, what it might have felt like, was something loving; it is not teaching it is sharing.

In such encounters, as a conversation develops you might share something you are puzzled by, a question you have, not only might the conversation help you in your understanding it will also show three things, it will show that Christians do not have all the answers, a common misconception, it can demonstrate that church is about more than listening, and that church is a place for questions.

Going back to Acts, the fruit of the early church was bringing people to God by introducing them to the teachings of Jesus and his example of love. Philip helped the Ethiopian to recognise God as a part of his life, through sharing the story of his experience of Jesus's teaching in his own life. It is the same today, we are called to be proclaimers of love, and inviters to the party that is growing in God.

The wisdom of God in Exodus demonstrates that no structure will bring people to God, not even an institution as rooted in history as the church, it is people who bring others to God, that is why we talk of the priesthood of all believers because each one of us has a part to play and a story to share, and each one of us must trust God when he calls us to go and share. Just as Philip obeyed we too must obey the call of God on our everyday lives.

How have you shown God's love to a stranger this week?

