

Philip

Read Acts Chapter 8 1b-8.

This morning we are continuing our journey through the book of Acts. Last week you looked at the story of martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7) and today we find out what happened next.

In the year or so following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension we discover that the first Christians (known as followers of 'The Way') were generally well regarded by the general population (Acts 5:13). Trouble, such as it was, was mostly directed at the Apostles as the public face of the church. But with Stephen's martyrdom however, opposition grows, and for the first time, ordinary believers find themselves being persecuted. Saul is going from house to house (possibly from house church to house church) having Christians arrested and imprisoned (Acts 8:3). The Hellenistic Christians may have been singled out in particular because of their association with Stephen.

The situation is so severe that many believers flee Jerusalem including Philip. Philip was one of the Hellenistic Jewish believers - one of the seven men of impeccable character chosen by the Jerusalem Church to serve as a Deacon (Acts 6). When the persecution starts Philip heads for nearby Samaria.

We are told in v.4 that 'wherever the believers went they preached the message.' This turns out to be very important for the future mission of the church and is why Luke spends a chapter following the story of Philip. Perhaps Luke heard this story from Philip himself, when Paul and Luke stayed with him in Caesarea as they travelled back to Jerusalem? (Acts 21).

Philip doesn't feature a huge amount in the books of Acts, but he plays a pivotal role in helping to take the gospel from Jerusalem, to Samaria and then 'The ends of the earth'.

Jesus' command in Acts 1:8 starts to evolve:

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

It would be nice to think that the church took Jesus at his word and had a clear mission strategy to fulfil this command - but no. Several years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the core of the Church is still in Jerusalem.

But Chapter 8 persecution leads to the church in Jerusalem being scattered and Philip heads for Samaria.

Thanks to Jesus and the story of 'The Good Samaritan' - we have heard of the Samaritans. We know that the Samaritans and Jews were related. The Samaritans were the descendants of some of the northern tribes of Israel (Ephraim, Manasseh and Levi) but that after the northern kingdom had been invaded by Assyria in 720 BC many of the population were deported. The rest of the population intermarried with the gentiles settled in the area by the Assyrians, so they were of mixed race - part Jewish, part gentile - and definitely secondclass citizens so far as the Jews were concerned.

They worshipped in Yahweh but for political and historical reasons believed that this worship should take place on Mount Gerizim and they only accepted the first five books of the Bible (Torah) as Scripture. But like the Jews, they were awaiting a coming Messiah - another Prophet like Moses. So, when Philip starts to proclaim that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, he receives a positive reception.

Phillip's preaching is accompanied by exorcisms and healings - signs that the Samaritans would have understood as authenticating his message. The messianic hopes of the Samaritan peoples are being fulfilled and so many Samaritans put their faith in Jesus Christ and are baptised, and there is much joy on the part of those who believe.

They too are incorporated into the Church, as shown by the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of hands when Peter and John arrive. Samaritan Christians and Jewish Christians are now no different - both are brought into the family of God on equal terms.

But how does this relate to us today?

I'm sure when the persecution started, the church in Jerusalem didn't think yippee – this is just what we really need! This will be a fantastic opportunity to get out there and evangelise the world!

With the benefit of hindsight however, we can see that what must have seemed like a disaster for the church in Jerusalem, God uses for good. The Samaritans get to hear the gospel and then the first Gentile, the Ethiopian Eunuch. It is worth noting that the Jews referred to Ethiopia as 'The end of the earth'!

We can see how this was all part of God's plan for the message of salvation to be proclaimed in every corner of the world - a plan which is still unfolding today. When that task is completed, God will bring human history to a conclusion and God's Kingdom - a new heaven and new earth - will finally be revealed.

We may find it hard to discern much good in the present Corona pandemic with the enormous disruption and heart break that it has caused, but God is still in control and history is moving towards its conclusion. God's plan is still on course. God has allowed this to happen and he will use it for good. So, what is God up to in these disturbing and disorientating times? How does God plan to use these circumstances?

As God's people we need to be listening to what the Spirit is saying to us and pay attention to how he wants to lead us. What if God wants to use these circumstances to shake us up a bit? Wake us up? Move us out of our comfort zone and force us to rely afresh on him? Perhaps our present circumstances could be a new chapter in the mission of the church in the same way as it was for the church in Jerusalem.

What if the closing of our church buildings turned out to be a blessing in disguise? Perhaps not for us, but for those who don't yet know Christ! What if it galvanised us into finding new ways to share the gospel with our neighbours, friends, and work colleagues? Let's pray that we would pay close attention to what the Spirit is saying to us in these times and that we will be able to keep up with him – as Philip did!

Kate Whiting

Please continue to read the rest of the story in Chapter 8.