

4th August – Morning Service
Evangelism – one person at a time
Rev Alan Combes

Call to Worship - Psalm 63:1–4

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands to praise you.

StF 25 – God is here!

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| 1) God is here! As we his people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of his Spirit
Into open minds and hearts. | 3) Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold;
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old;
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore. |
| 2) Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font, and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each. | 4) Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel,
Help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive:
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe! |

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Opening Prayers

We gather today to proclaim almighty God – creator of all that is seen and unseen.

We gather today to proclaim the Living Word of life who was there from the beginning. The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. That which we heard, which we seen with our eyes, and touched with our hands, Jesus we proclaim to you.

We gather today to proclaim the Holy Spirit – the breath of life, giver of wisdom who grants us boldness to speak.

Faithful God, we pray that in our worship we might meet and know you – three in one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose word is life: come amongst us with saving power to free our praise, inspire our prayer and shape our lives. **Amen**

Reading: Acts 8:26-38

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Reflection: What is an evangelist?

When I say the word evangelist what comes to mind? Is it images of Martin Luther King Jr or perhaps Billy Graham standing in front of large crowds? Articulate, powerful, prominent?

I wonder how we might describe or understand an evangelist? What do they do? Is this a special role in the church? Is it undertaken only by certain people? Do you consider yourself an evangelist?

Certainly we know that we all bring different gifts to the life of the church - we have all been created differently and we all have a unique journey. And yes, in some circumstances, we might name someone as an evangelist for the role they play in church life. And yet, it is also true that we are all called to be evangelists... to share the good news of Jesus.

In the New Testament Philip the Evangelist first makes an appearance in the Acts of the Apostles as one of the seven chosen by the early Church at Jerusalem to take charge of the daily administration of charity to the poor widows. After the death of Stephen, there was a general persecution of the Church at Jerusalem and many Christians fled to escape it. Philip went to Samaria, where he preached the Gospel to the Samaritans.

So what is interesting here is that in our modern day language, Philip was essentially a steward with responsibly for administration! He was a backroom man – planning, organising, serving – seeking to ensure that the church lived out its commitment to support all of its flock fairly. And yet – through circumstance and faith – he became known as an evangelist! Why? Because he had his eyes open to see someone who was already exploring the existence of God, who was already interested in faith, and when asked about a passage of scripture he stepped forward, made a connection to Jesus and ‘proclaimed the good news’.

Being open, stepping forward, sharing...if a church administrator can become an evangelist, I wonder what that says to us?

Prayer of Confession

The gospel calls us to turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ. As we offer ourselves to him in penitence and faith, may we renew our confidence and trust in his mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ, we confess we have failed you and we ask for your mercy and your help.

We are sorry for when our selfishness betrays you: Lord, forgive us.

We are sorry when we fail to share the pain of your suffering: Lord, forgive us.

We are sorry when we run away from those who disown or abuse you: Lord, forgive us.

We are sorry for those times when we are afraid of being known to belong to you and fail to share your story. Lord, forgive us.

Almighty God, who in Jesus Christ has given us a kingdom that cannot be destroyed, forgive us our sins, open our eyes to God’s truth, strengthen us to do God’s will and give us the joy of his kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

StF 388 – Let every Christian pray

- 1) Let every Christian pray,
This day, and every day,
Come, Holy Spirit, come!
Was not the Church we love
Commissioned from above?
Come, Holy Spirit, come!
- 2) The Spirit brought to birth
The Church of Christ on earth
To seek and save the lost:
God never has withdrawn,
Since that tremendous dawn,
Those gifts of Pentecost.
- 3) Always the Spirit strove
To teach her how to love:
Come, Holy Spirit, come!
Age after age, anew,
She proved the gospel true:
Come, Holy Spirit, come!
- 4) Only the Spirit's power
Can fit us for this hour:
Come, Holy Spirit, come!
Instruct, inspire, unite;
And make us see the light:
Come, Holy Spirit, come!

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Reading: Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Reflection: We are all evangelists!

In Matthew 28 v19 Jesus says; '*Go and make disciples of all nations...*'

Philip, having fled persecution, selected Samaria. This is, in itself, proof that he was able to rise above the ordinary Jewish prejudices of his time. He stepped out of the conventional norms of his day and showed that nowhere is off-limits to the Good News. The Samaritans were a group who had split off from the Jews centuries earlier. They were outsiders and they had intermarried with the Gentiles. It was therefore rather incredible that Philip should go to this community. Yet we're told that the Samaritans all paid close attention to what he said. And later Peter and John came to Samaria to bless the new converts. Perhaps the incident we always remember Philip for most is his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. He was obedient and went from Samaria to a desert road and heard the Eunuch in his chariot reading Isaiah. Philip asks the question: "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" and what an incredible response he received: "*How can I unless someone explains it to me?*"

Here we have the essence of the evangelist; picking up on where the person you meet might be in their faith journey and then moving forward with them together. The account goes on to say that Philip, starting from that point in scripture (i.e., starting from where the person was in their thinking), '*told him the good news about Jesus.*' The message he shared was God's message; the story of the life, and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth - a new story then, a familiar story now, leading to faith and Baptism for the Eunuch.

Philip is the only person in the Bible described as an evangelist. Unfortunately, when we think of an 'evangelist' we think of someone like Billy Graham, preaching to large crowds of people, but this is not the case according to the Bible. It does say that Philip preached to groups of people but most verses about him are associated with the story we've just heard - the conversion of one single person. I think that this tells us something very important. Perhaps the lesson is that every single person is important to God. And clearly witnessing the Gospel to one person is the work of an evangelist as much as preaching to a large crowd.

The word 'evangelist' means to bear glad tidings, to share the Gospel, to bear witness to the story of Jesus and what that means to us. The new Testament teaches us that we are all called to do that... so we are all evangelists! And one of the most precious things I hold onto in the journey of faith-sharing is what Wesley called 'prevenient grace' - Christ going before us.

Martyn Atkins calls this John Wesley's big doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who urged Wesley to leave the church building because the good news needed to be proclaimed to a wider audience. Wesley found this profoundly challenging but, like Philip, he was obedient and he did. And the effect was incredible. Every time he preached people awoke as he offered them Christ - God preparing hearts to repent - God committing the Holy Spirit to go before us. So often, if we are bold enough to speak, we discover Christ already there. God's prevenient grace at work as we go out beyond the walls of the church and its building. It's a risky place, but we take courage and find the Lord already at work.

In the congregation of a church in my previous ministry there was a woman whose husband was supportive of her but did not really attend church much himself. He would do things if asked but he did not express a faith himself. One day I plucked up the courage to ask him if he would like to attend a confirmation course I was going to run, aimed at exploring the Christian Faith. I was nervous because I knew his link to the church was fragile and the last thing I wanted to do was scare him away, not least because of how upset that would make his wife! To my amazement he said that he had been thinking about this himself for a while and he really would like to come! God at work ahead of me through prevenient grace. He attended faithfully, his faith grew and he was confirmed in a joyful service. He wrote to me the day after and said, 'Alan, the promises we made yesterday were really important and I will endeavour to keep them as best as I can.'

More and more these days our churches are becoming community centres for Youth organisations, playgroups, community groups... These are mission opportunities on our doorstep – the interfaces we have with the community! And at its heart, all mission, all growth is 'one-at-a-time.' Our mission is simple - seek to share the good news with one person – bring one person to faith.

When John Wesley died in 1791 it was estimated that he had earned over thirty thousand pounds in his lifetime. He had given it all away. He left behind some books and his faded Geneva gown. His executors found that his total treasury amounted to ten guineas (£10.50)! And his will directed that four of these guineas should pay four unemployed men to carry his coffin and the remainder to be distributed among his poorest preachers.

What else did he leave behind? Changed lives - hundreds of them, Christian communities dotted all over this country and in other parts of the world, fellowships seeking to take God seriously. Oh, that we may all draw to the foot of the cross and experience his powerful love and make this our legacy - one of transformed lives, transformed communities - thanks be to God!

We all want to see people meeting God in Christ, growing in the knowledge and love of God. What a great offer of faith in Jesus we have; the incredible love that Christ pours out on us is to be shared. And yes, as we share that seed, it may sometimes fall on hard and stony ground. It is not our role to convert people – that is God's job. But we play our part. Sharing our story. Together, let's take God seriously. Let's put mission on the agenda and give our church an aim to share the good news of Jesus to the people we meet. Amen. *(Reflections based on original work by Rev S Wild)*

StF 405 – Great is the darkness

- 1) Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in Your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies.
 - 2) May now Your church rise with power and love,
This glorious gospel proclaim,
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to this world,
That we might speed Your return.
- Ch) *Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit we pray.
Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit on us today.*
- 3) Great celebrations on that final day,
When out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrows will end,
And rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet.

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Prayers of Intercession – based on prayers by David Adam

Blessed are you, Lord our God; in you is life and life eternal. You love us with an everlasting love.

You give us the freedom to turn to you or turn away from you. You do not compel us to love you but invite us to know you and to be faithful to you. We give you thanks for the universal church across the world. We rejoice in the fellowship of all who seek to share the good news with those that they meet, trusting in the Holy Spirit to go before us and to prepare the way. We remember before you those who are new to the faith and all who are seeking to deepen their faith. We pray for all who are tempted to turn their back on you, those who are troubled by doubt and all those who are finding their faith a challenge.

Holy Lord, **our trust is in you.**

We give you thanks for those who brought us to know you and love you. We remember our teachers and preachers All those who serve the church in unseen ways. May our fellowship and relationships reflect our relationship with you. And we give thanks for all who have committed themselves to work for your glory and the benefits of others. Holy Lord, **our trust is in you.**

We remember all who feel let down, deserted or lonely. We pray for the persecuted and the marginalised in society. We ask your blessing on all who are alone at home or in hospital, on all who seek healing or deliverance. Holy Lord, **our trust is in you.**

You, Lord, are the giver of life eternal. We remember before you the faithful departed.

Those whose life and witness enabled us on our journey of faith. May they rejoice in the fellowship of the saints and the fullness of life eternal. Holy Lord, **our trust is in you.**

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 106 – God whose almighty word

- 1) God whose almighty word
Chaos and darkness heard,
And took their flight,
Hear us, we humbly pray,
And where the gospel day
Sheds not its glorious ray,
Let there be light!
- 2) Christ, you have come to bring
On your redeeming wing
Healing and sight,
Health to the sick in mind,
Sight to the inly blind,
O to all humankind
Let there be light!
- 3) Spirit of truth and love,
Life-giving, holy Dove,
Speed forth your flight;
Move on the waters' face,
Bearing the lamp of grace,
And in earth's darkest place
Let there be light!
- 4) Blessed and holy Three,
Glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, Love, Might,
Boundless as ocean's tide
Rolling in fullest pride,
Through the world far and wide
Let there be light!

John Marriott

Blessing

Faithful God, who fulfilled the promises of Easter by sending us your Holy Spirit and has called us to make known to every race and nation the way of life eternal: open our lips, that every tongue may tell of your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**