

Being guided

Acts 8:26-40; I John 4:7-21

Walking recently around over the Aberlady Bay nature reserve, a place near where I grew up, I noticed that the pathways I remembered had been moved. No doubt for reasons of conservation in some instances, and perhaps for Covid-19 social distancing in others. As you go further into the nature reserve the paths become less clear, so the reserve rangers have put in, for many years now, sticks and markers to point the way. The pathways avoiding the marshy ground lie between the markers.

If you drive up into the Highlands you will see on either side of the road poles driven into the ground, set a little back from the road edge. These are placed there for the winter months, when the snows come and the roads are covered over, but the way forward is marked so that people, even when they can't see the road itself, can know the direction in which it travels, and they too can travel forward relatively safely, being guided.

Maybe someone should have a word with the road planning officials at Edinburgh Council to put in some guiding principles to help the residents, delivery vans, Fire Engines, ambulances, bin lorries and other motorists to try and negotiate the disgrace that is the new road traffic system in the Braid, Cluny and Hermitage area of our parish, though that might be too sensible. If the Ethiopian eunuch had been travelling through on his chariot he'd not only get through the book of Isaiah; he'd manage the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments. But don't get me started...

Our story from Acts about Philip and the Ethiopian is one of the more colourful narratives in the book, and it underlines again Luke, the author's, desire to show that the good news of Jesus was not just for the chosen people of Israel, it was for the whole world of women and men. This is a passage about inclusion, and it's also a passage about guidance, about helping along the way.

We know very little about Philip, other than he had been chosen to help minister to the growing early church in Jerusalem. He had four unmarried daughters who were also engaged in spreading the good news, another sign of gospel inclusion that might be a surprise to some. We know that he entertained Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem. And we know he was a man of dynamic

faith. When prompted by the Spirit of God he moves, and when he sees the chariot with the Ethiopian, he runs. When God directs us, the way becomes clear, and when the way is clear, we are not meant to hold back and hang about. We go forward with purpose. And as Philip runs, he finds the senior court official reading from the Bible, the prophet Isaiah, and a prophecy Christians now recognise as one about Jesus, the Lamb of God, sacrificed that the people of the world might have hope.

On that desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza, and it is still a desert road to this day, to a person who might not have expected a welcome from God, God not only opens the book, but sends a hopeful, insightful interpreter who can, “read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God’s Spirit.”ⁱ Philip acts as a signpost, a marker on the way, a guide, so that the Ethiopian can ask questions, and begin to understand what God might be saying to him at that very moment.

The Bible is never merely about ‘back then.’ It is always a word to us, to this moment, and to the circumstances we live through today. When Jesus first preached in the Nazareth synagogue, also from Isaiah as it happens, He ended His ‘sermon’ with the words, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”ⁱⁱ This Ethiopian eunuch, who despite his status would have been treated as other, as not being quite complete, as being somehow unclean and not welcome in Jewish society, finds on a desert road that the Jesus prophesied in Isaiah also knew about humiliation, and about being ostracized religiously, and not being welcome. For the Ethiopian, and for all who follow Jesus, this stony road of suffering and being kept at arms-length is transformed into the pathway of hope, and being saved, and being welcomed in through baptism. Being guided, by Philip, the Ethiopian found the way. Being guided, by Philip, the Ethiopian found that the road that looked blocked and impassable, and not for the likes of him, suddenly opened up and led, in the end, to a welcoming God in the person of the Jesus Who includes everyone.

“When we think about it, there were actually a few things that people could have thrown up as roadblocks to prevent this Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized. He was living in Ethiopia, for one thing, so he was cut off from the land of Israel. He was a eunuch and thus in violation of the (Jewish) purity code. He was a member of the cabinet of the queen of Ethiopia, therefore loyal to

the wrong sovereign. He belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job, and possessed the wrong sexuality.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Guided by Philip, the Ethiopian asked the right question: “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” ‘Absolutely nothing,’ whispered the Spirit. ‘Absolutely nothing.’ Willing to be guided. Willing to believe. Willing to commit to Jesus. Willing to follow Jesus. That is what leads to baptism, and a life of faith inside and outside the Church. That is the good news about Jesus. Philip pointed in the right direction; Philip guided; and the Ethiopian found the way, and followed.

Very few of us in life find the way of life and the way of hope all by ourselves. Yes we have to make some decisions for ourselves but often it is after we have been pointed in the right direction, and guided by someone or something. Who have been the Philips in your life? Who have been the women and men who have taken the time to journey with you along the road of life, and helped you think, and question, and realised and understand and come to your own decision? The parent or grandparent or relative whose example of kindness and gentleness comforted and warmed you. The teacher or minister or person of faith or colleague whose words and courage inspired you and opened your eyes.

I can look back over my life, and I am sure you can look back over your lives, and see so many people who, along that long and winding road, spoke some words, put a book into our hands, showed us something of the world and its needs, included us in the work of a charity or good cause, took us to a meeting, brought us to church and by that action, transformed who we are and what we have become.

My great aunts gave me a Bible when I was baptized as an infant. I looked occasionally at the pictures, but never read it. Held on to it for sentimental reasons, until I was twenty. And then I read, and then I began to understand, and find myself guided along a road that has led me, today, to this pulpit. Who have been the people who guided you in your believing, and still do?

And all the other roads along which you travel: your choice of work, your politics, the charities and causes you support, the music you love, the values you have. All those people, like Philip

and the Ethiopian, like apparent chance encounters, yet prompted by God's whispering Spirit Who says, 'Say this, do that, be there'; and lives, and worlds, have changed for the better.

One final thought: maybe you are the one who guides. The one who points the way, opens the door, makes the suggestion, and shows the kindness. Not aggressively or controllingly, but as offering a possibility, to help someone to understand and decide.

Being guided. Being open to moving, and seeing, and talking, and listening. Being open to understanding, and believing, and committing. Being open to deciding, and acting. Being on the road in the first place. To encounter Jesus and what He means to you and for you today, and as it comes again and again, accepting the love and the welcome God continuously offers.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Thomas G Long, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 p456*

ⁱⁱ *Luke 4:21*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Long, p458*