**
Acts 8.26-40
John 15.1-8
2nd May 2021

 Believing and Belonging**

Minister: Gracious God
**All: May your Living Word
 come to us afresh this morning**
Minister: So, touch, we pray our minds and hearts
 with your grace and truth
**All: Through Christ our Lord
 and in the power of your Spirit. Amen**
One of the things still available to us during the Pandemic, as long as churches were allowed to open, has – surprisingly, I think – been the sacrament of baptism, even by full immersion. Scanning through Government guidelines has become a fixture of my working life during this last year and amid all the many *does and don’ts* there was a fascinating paragraph or two on how to conduct a Covid safe baptism. I thought that was great, and not something I anticipated would be on the Government’s radar.

Today’s reading from Acts ends with a baptism that was neither planned nor regulated. A spontaneous event that came as the climax of this life changing moment for the Ethiopian official as he travels back home from Jerusalem.

We know nothing of what he did whilst in the city on personal pilgrimage. Maybe he had purchased the scroll from which he was now reading. Maybe he’s been at the outer courts of the Temple. We simply don’t know. But that pilgrimage was now ending and En route home, via the Gaza desert road he reads, as is the custom out loud, from the prophet Isaiah. Philip, prompted by the Spirit, joins him, and guides him through that passage. And then, spontaneously, this finance official from the court of Queen Candace, sees an oasis and asks Philip to baptise him. It breaks all the traditions we’ve woven round this sacrament since; no congregation was present, and no baptismal classes were held in preparation. Yet as one commentator I read last week put it this was a moment to *put cautious rationality on the shelf and follow an unrestrained God into the world.* And that, sort of, describes what the Acts of the Apostles is really all about.

There is, it seems, quite a lot of ambiguity and contradiction about our Ethiopian official. If he will forgive us for somewhat invading his private life, we observe that although as a eunuch he was traditionally thought of as being powerless yet, overseeing the Queen’s treasury made him powerful. He’s deliberately referred to as an Ethiopian, which in those far off days was code for saying he came from what was considered the edge of the known world, way out in the sticks, yet he’s an impressive character worthy of note and inclusion in one of the first books of The Church. It’s not conclusively known if he was a Jew or Gentile, yet he has travelled to Jerusalem famous for its temple and now enthusiastically reads from literature which is, maybe, outside of his tradition. And then, after listening to Philip and taking in his counsel it’s not the evangelist but the Ethiopian who suggests the next step and suddenly brings the carriage to an abrupt baptismal halt.

Peel away the layers of this story and its full of surprises and contradictions, so much so that surely no one could have seen it coming. There’s nothing pre-planned or predictable in Acts 8.

All my time as a minister I’ve been bombarded by grand sounding Mission Programmes that have originated in denominational headquarters. They have been full of good intentions and encouragements yet, such national initiatives rarely seem to hit the spot in the local context. God seems to work outside the box so often.

Margaret and I have, over recent years, acted as Home Mission visitors to local churches who receive a centrally funded grant to help support their ministers. We have to do a certain amount of box ticking when we make our report. Yet, at every church we’ve visited it’s clear that some of the most exciting and productive activities have had beginnings that seemed to come from nowhere. No plan was being followed, it was just that someone had a bright idea, or the community responded to a new need. Instead of mission emerging from a rigid process I’m left wondering if it doesn’t flourish better in what at first sight might look like chaos. And yet God uses these seemingly chance encounters or random moments as we put, what was it, *rationality on the shelf and follow an unrestrained God out into the world.*I sometimes think that’s the modus operandi of chaplains, whether they work at airports, hospitals or football clubs. They call it *Holy Hanging Around.* Just being there, sharing the life in all its ups and downs of the community to which they minister and which ministers back to them. And in moments planned and unplanned, God seems to break in and there is the sharing of kindness, support, encouragement, and blessing.

And maybe that’s your experience too. You serve God by simply living at the centre of your marriage, family, church, and community as a fellow traveller and along the road there comes moments when speaking or listening, serving, or being served, seems to bring something of God into the everyday.

In today’s story isn’t it significant that the God moment didn’t happen in Jerusalem, for surely that was the plan, and being a finance minister I’m sure the Ethiopian had it pencilled in the diary. No, almost chaotically, the moment came when it looked as if the pilgrimage had failed, and he was returning home. At that unexpected moment something of God blesses his life, brings him great joy and a different sort of future.

Now, the lectionary pairs this story from Acts with one of the I AM sayings of Jesus found in John 15: *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Dwell in me and I will dwell in you.*If the Acts story is about believing, this word picture from John’s gospel is about belonging.

And in a sense that might well have been the continuation of the journey for our treasury official.

Although we don’t know what happens next in his personal narrative it has been a feature of history that Ethiopia has long had a strong and vibrant Christian community, one of the biggest in Africa today numbering some 50 million Christians. Might it just be that something of this rich tradition finds its origins in stories like today’s. The believing moved on to belonging and the formation of a thriving community of faith.

This ‘being together’ which is so central to the idea of the Vine and abiding in Christ has its challenges.

For some of us it has felt relatively natural. Indeed, we might have belonged even before we believed. Church is an environment we’ve known all our lives. Its culture is our culture and coming to services feels like coming home.

But I suspect, we are now fast moving away from that as the norm these days. Fewer and fewer people have this sort of background so, even if they feel confident to explore faith at a local congregation, church culture may be new, or even off putting. After all there’s nothing in the bible about having to meet at 10.30 on a Sunday, sitting in ranks, singing four hymns, saying two prayers and listening to one long sermon.

I thought that was very generous of me to include that last bit!

Before the Pandemic it was fascinating, and often very encouraging, to see Fresh Expressions of church start up outside of orthodox church culture. For some that means worshipping on a weeknight after work, for others it’s Table Fellowship – gathering for a meal and ending it with bread and wine in someone’s home, and for others it might mean Forest Church, coming together outside in a cathedral of trees.

All of these expressions are probably a nightmare for ecclesiastical institutions, yet each one surely shows the breath of the Holy Spirit touching peoples’ lives and offering a different expression for them of what it means to abide in the Vine.

And surely, we are glad about that.

The important thing is finding and nurturing that sense of interdependence and mutuality. Of abiding first in God and then growing alongside one another in the branch of God’s life which is the community of faith to which we belong – whatever its expression, be it fresh or traditional.

And so, today’s readings bring together two really important concepts for us. There is that transitional moment on the road to Gaza as the Ethiopian is baptised. Yet, that needs to be followed by a consistent way of life which is made possible by abiding in Christ. Believing and Belonging.

At my Baptist theological college we all seemed to have the same favourite lecturer and he was the one Anglican on the staff! His teaching was always so clear, concise and to the point. And I remember a one liner that he fed us one day: *Baptism lasts a day, discipleship a lifetime.*Well, that’s your essay title for this week!

I know it’s perhaps pushing it a bit, but I’d love to think the Ethiopian did return home and establish a community of faith, one that has grown and grown over the centuries. I’d love to think that although his baptism lasted a day his discipleship continued a lifetime.

A few years ago I attended the 80th birthday of my bible class teacher. We had a photo taken either side of this man we all love and owe so much to. I looked at it the other day and realised I was baptised with most of these people on the same November evening forty-six years ago. The really joyful thing is that everyone one of us in that picture is still seeking to be follower of Jesus, still a member of a community of faith. I think that, more than anything else that day, brought a huge smile of thanksgiving to our bible class teacher.

Today, in these two passages of scripture we have thought of believing and belonging. And may that be our lived experience in the name of our unrestrained God. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 22nd April 2021*