

Worship from Home: Sunday Worship for 2 May

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

SERMON

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As a chaplain without a regular congregation to lead almost all my work depends on conversation; because of that today's passage from Acts, with its conversation between two strangers fascinates me. It has challenged me to think about the way I attend to people I meet as I go through life. The story contains so many of the elements of the community life of a university. The two men are strangers to each other, they are from different parts of the world.

As with our university communities the two have different levels of status and privilege. The Ethiopian whose name we aren't told is a high ranking government official. Philip, appointed to share with Stephen in the task of caring for the finances of Jesus' followers, would be more likely to have a reputation within his government as troublesome, one of the growing numbers of followers of Jesus who had been upsetting the establishment.

The two meet in a place strange to them both, a place that neither of them are at home in.

Each with questions for the other, at the end of a few verses whilst a lot has happened there has been no great drama. No thunder and lightning or incredible miracle, just a simple conversation.

In the intimacy of a conversation God is found.

How do we have those transformational conversations? The kind of conversations that allow for growth and change rather than simply restating, again and again, the same message in the hope that one size fits all.

University and Church communities are both contexts in which there is a concern about how conversation takes place. Some people are fearful of getting it wrong whereas others are certain they know exactly how to get a message across. Listening in to conversations about faith I sometimes notice people focusing on the point they think they need to make rather than the relationship in which they hope to share their belief.

Philip and his Ethiopian conversation partner give anyone who wants to share faith, an important illustration of how to create a sensitive and confident conversation that allows the Holy Spirit to join the encounter. What are the characteristics of Philip's encounter with this high ranking official that I can learn from myself?

Firstly, the conversation is prompted by God. God has asked Philip to go and Philip, although he knows the road to be a wilderness road has gone. When the Ethiopian realises who Philip is associated with he could have been forgiven for hastening on his chariot. We are currently in the weeks after Easter, the Ethiopian will have heard the stories about Jesus of Nazareth, the trouble he caused for the authorities. Philip's colleague Stephen has just been killed but whatever the stories surrounding the followers of Jesus the man at the heart of the Ethiopian establishment is open to a conversation.

Equally Philip need not have waited for the conversation, he could have preached unbidden, he could have stood at the roadside using a rock as a pulpit guessing at the questions he thinks need answering. But he doesn't, instead in this wilderness Philip begins the conversation with a question. The Ethiopian in turn invites him to sit with him in his chariot. Together they talk.

The Ethiopian is clearly seeking God, he is returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, Philip is open to God having followed his instruction but it is in that encounter between the two men that God works transformation. Philip waits for an invitation to sit in the chariot and begin his teaching, the Ethiopian is open to learning. When he responds by asking for baptism Philip doesn't say – just hang on I need to tell you some more stuff that I think you need. Or I just need to be certain you have understood this exactly correctly. Can you take this exam or fill out this form? He simply responds to the request for baptism. Philip trusts God and his newly baptised conversation partner to take matters forward from there.

Powerfully for me as a chaplain, Philip, just like so many chaplains after one conversation is out of the Ethiopian's life forever. With no idea what happens next. God prompts the encounter, and God moves the story on. The precious jewel in the middle is the conversation.

This is why good conversation matters. Good, and Godly conversation doesn't need the right kind of building, whether that be church or university, good conversation needs an attitude of heart and mind. As the story shows with the right ingredients, the prompting of the Spirit to begin a dialogue, openness of heart, and a willingness to learn, transforming conversations can take place in the wilderness between total strangers.

During lockdown students and staff have continued to try and have conversations about faith, some have told me about how they have attempted to find Christian resources online rather than wait for buildings to reopen.

As universities reopen we will embrace a blended approach, both online and in buildings. I hope the same can be true of our conversations about faith and our acts of worship. Blended church, with all the features of today's story people being led by God to discuss faith with confident respectfulness, online, in the open air and in buildings, questions asked, invitations given, life giving, challenging, transformational conversations had. All trusting that God will take forward the story of the church however brief our conversations may be.