



The Incredible Journey

Acts 8:26-40

Last time we considered how we are called to be witnesses, but to be effective witnesses we need to get out of the way we have maybe held for decades and move from ideas and methods that were valid 30 years ago but are no longer relevant. That doesn't mean that the Gospel has changed – it certainly hasn't. But society has changed and people has changed and that we need to change the focus of church from maintenance to mission and switch from building-focussed mission to people-based mission.

And to do that people have developed tools to help us to do that. They don't replace the Word of God or the Gospel, but they do help us understand where people are. We connect well with scripture, but we don't connect well with people. That was the problem with the Jerusalem church. They knew their Bibles and they knew the Jewish culture, but they didn't know where to start with Samaria and the uttermost parts of the Earth. The Holy Spirit had to literally push them to shift their perception.

So last time I gave you Engel's Scale. It's a bit complicated if you studied it after last time. Can I simplify it. You bet I can. And here it is: through life we travel a road from unbelief towards God. All people travel it and as we do we get to know more of God until we come to a saving knowledge and then continue towards maturity in Christ. The only problem is that people move along the road at different speeds before they detour into death. Some are raving atheists and never get far. Some believe in God or Jesus – the majority but never come to saving faith. A minority are saved and grow in their faith to maturity in Christ.

Basically, life is Journey of Faith on which everybody travels, but few get to the end. We need to meet them on the way and help them along the part of the road they are moving along at that time. Some people move along quickly, for others it is slow and tortuous. Some are on dead halt for days, months, years or until they die. Usually a bit of help from someone smooths the route, speeds things up and straightens some of the bends!

And we are called to be His witnesses. Where? The remit covers everywhere but the prerogative precisely where and to whom is that of the Holy Spirit. And that was the case here with Philip. An angel came to Philip and sent him to a place. It was the desert road towards Gaza. Not the nicest place to go walking. But it was that desert place where God had prepared a traveller for him to witness to. It was not just a metaphorical road – it was a real one!

Remember, that the whole task of witness is not according to our bright ideas. Things like Engel's Scale are tools we can use to help us, but they are not substitute for walking in the Spirit. And we won't get anywhere unless we develop the discipline of listening to God. Philip was led to an unlikely place – a desert place to meet the Ethiopian. Would he have thought of that one himself? And to an Ethiopian? I doubt it. All of the stuff I may share with you from this point onwards about reaching out is wasted unless we cultivate our prayer lives. We need to pray for others and for ourselves that we will be led to people in their need and lead them to Christ. I think you may already have the first part of that in your mind. You know who God is leading you to.

Philip was prepared by the Spirit to meet the Ethiopian and the Spirit had prepared the Ethiopian for him. It was a marriage made in heaven – the right person, the right place and the right time. That’s something that we need to cultivate because it’s sadly lacking generally in our day and age. Philip’s is a good model for witness and evangelism.

- He listened first of all to the voice of God – God spoke to Him twice and he listened and obeyed however strange the command was.
- He listened to the Ethiopian – he took time to find out where he was coming from.

We need to meet people where they are rather than try to answer questions they aren’t asking in ways that they don’t understand in order to get them to a place they don’t want to go to (yet).

Like Philip, we need to understand where people are and need to minister to them where they are. The Ethiopian was ripe fruit. he was a student of the scriptures and the Holy Spirit had led him to a choice piece of scripture – Isaiah 53 – it was easy reaping for Philip.

So here we are, and we meet people on their journey – or to be precise, God has led us to them. So what do we do. Find out where they are. Most people we meet are usually people who are family, friends or colleagues. Listen to them, and find out where they are in relation to Christ. Actually it is the most basic rule of pastoral work – listen. See what’s up with them, rather than try to burble off stuff they may not understand or be ready for.

- He used what he knew to lead him to Christ

Philip may not have known much about Ethiopian culture and the rules of protocol when entering a dignitary’s chariot – but he did know Jesus and he did understand Isaiah 53. And the Spirit put him in the right place at the right time to use it creatively. It’s the same with us. We may not feel we know much or have fantastic Bible knowledge, but if we are open to be used by the spirit, then what we have will match the need God leads us to. Remember that as you walk the road of life and as God puts people in your path.

So what we have examined tonight then is that if we are to reach others, we need to recognise that it is a work of the Spirit. We need to hear His voice and follow His ways. Then he will give us “divine appointments”. he will lead us to ripe fruit – travellers on life’s journey that He matches up with us. All we must do is walk.

As we go on to explore how people come to faith next week – this is the most important – it happens because of the Holy Spirit’s leading, prompting and power and He underlies everything.