



Phil's Road Movie

Acts 8:26-40

A road film is a type of film in which the film's plot takes place during a journey – and it needn't involve a road as such – just a journey. It's rather like the tales of classical poems like *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* or tales of English literature the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. Great road movies: *Saving Private Ryan*, *Cannonball Run*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Mr's Bean's Holiday*!

Our lives as such are a journey and we make journeys within them. And as believers, God has called us to be church so that we can accompany one another on that journey because He never intended that we travel alone. We have the Holy Spirit and we have one another. How we accompany one another on our journey? It's the quality of how we accompany one another on our spiritual journey through life that determines the quality of our life as church. And as I've said before, it's how we accompany people on their spiritual journey before they've accepted Christ is important in helping them understand they need to trust Jesus.

I believe the challenge for us in the for new year is to ask the question: how willing are we to accompany people on their journey? How willing are we to befriend them, engage with their lives, care about them? We are committed to doing that as an organisation but I'm not thinking about that. I'm concerned how we act as a fellowship of individuals whom God had brought together as His church here. How we are as a church is the sum of the people in it.

So over the morning sermons I'm doing in the first part of the year, I'm going to explore a few themes to explore what being church is about.

The first one is how we approach important stops that God asks us to make on our journey. And to do this we are going to look at part of Philip's Journey and I've entitled it "Phil's Road Movie". Here Philip travels with someone and uses who he is to make important stops in his journey of faith. If you know this passage well, you'll guess what I'm talking about. If not, I'll keep the air of mystery for the moment.

The story starts with Philip's journey. He, like many disciples of Jesus, had to lie low when Saul of Tarsus started to persecute Christians and found himself being led by an angel on a lonely road towards Gaza. What irony – we did Gaza as well last week! How different that is to the same road today. It's a road that goes through a densely populated part of Israel, but presently is shut off at the border to the Gaza Strip. But then it was a little used road. I guess Philip must have wondered why he was being sent down there.

Until of course he came across the Ethiopian reading in his chariot – what was he going to do? You know the rest: he witnessed to him! Are you a believer this morning? Then I want to re-affirm something I've said on a few occasions before – we are all called to be Jesus' witnesses. Not a few keenies – but all of us. And Jesus doesn't call us all of us to be His witnesses as part of a church programme, or a church meeting, or a church event – He calls us to be witnesses to the people we meet, wherever we meet them.

That's how most people actually become Christians – because someone they know has showed Jesus to them. To be a witness you have to be two things:

- willing and ready to see opportunities
- ready to hear and obey the Holy Spirit.

By far, the main reason people don't come to Christ is because there is no witness to them that is

strong enough for them to sit up and take notice. What made people sit up and notice Jesus – because they were amazed by how He lived, what He said and what He did. He showed people that they mattered to Him and mattered to God.

And in this story we see a disciple going down the same path. The Holy Spirit prompts him to walk close to the Ethiopian's chariot. It wasn't normal for Jews to mix with foreigners – as Gentiles, they were beyond the favour of God as far as most Jews were concerned. But it wasn't what the Bible actually said and he needed a prod from the Holy Spirit – go up and earwig the Ethiopian. It's an important passage this one. Because here's Philip being asked to engage someone he never may have naturally spoken to, or even have felt worth speaking to about Christ. But here he was on a deserted road with the Ethiopian. God wants us to move outside our comfort zone and befriend people that maybe we normally wouldn't think to hard about. But how are people to know about God if no-one befriends them. The problem is that so often we ignore God's promptings and think it's someone else's problems. The opportunity is there and the prompting of the Spirit is there, if we are ready to listen to Him.

What did Philip do when he walked up to the chariot? Did he give him a tract? Did he give him an invitation to the synagogue? What about an invite to lunch? No, he opened his ears and recognised the opportunity God had given to him to speak to the man about something that was bugging him. For people willing to take the opportunities God places in their way and ready to obey the Holy Spirit then lives get changed. Growing churches in this country are ones where most of the fellowship are engaged seriously in getting to know people who don't know Jesus. They are also a people who are Jesus to one another within their fellowship – and that's critical as well.

All good road movies end in a climax, a dramatic twist. Here was Philip, helping this man on the first steps in his walk as a Christian and he was presented with his first opportunity to help this man in his faith.

As a church we actually have two strands to our mission statement: To serve Walton in Jesus name. We have been trying to do that in many ways over the last few years. There is the other bit we often don't talk about.

Help people follow Christ. I just mentioned that churches that grow are Jesus to one another. How do we do that? We bring them to faith, then we encourage them to take steps in faith and we encourage one another to grow in the faith. I'm going to explore this in the next few weeks. But what did Philip do here to encourage a new Christian?

As Philip and the Ethiopian trotted along in the chariot they both saw water. How amazing. A deserted desert road and there was a pool of water. *36 As they travelled down the road, they came to a place where there was some water, and the official said, "Here is some water. What is to keep me from being baptised?" 38 The official ordered the carriage to stop, and both Philip and the official went down into the water, and Philip baptised him.*

One of the common themes in the Acts of the Apostles is that everyone who believed was baptised. Believe and be baptised. It's the simple instruction of the New Testament. Let me give it to your from Jesus:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Are you a Christian, a follower, a disciple of Jesus? Have you been baptised? The witness of the Word of God is that people believe and the expectation is that they are baptised? Why? Because Jesus commands it and Philip had clearly also talked to the Ethiopian about it too. It was the norm. It was what was expected – it was the natural progression of coming to Christ. It's not something in Baptist churches that we encourage people to do. It's kind of not important and we don't see how it might help anyone. Surely we need to show or teach them vital truths rather than encourage them to be baptised? I was looking at the Facebook entry for an old friend from London this week. In her profile was an entry that said "The most important day of my life". I was intrigued as to what that might have been. I took a look and there were pictures of her baptism! But I believe that the word of God stresses that we make it a must encourage because people will miss out on something important in their spiritual growth if they don't obey Jesus in this way.

I shall be exploring this over the next few weeks with some people who are interested in baptism. It's open to anyone who is interested in being baptised. The remainder of this morning's sermon is a kind of aside to give you a little taster of what sorts of things we'll be covering.

So what is baptism? Let's get over the term first. For various historic reasons I won't go into at the moment, the word baptizo is a Greek word which translators have historically never properly translated but just given us an Anglicized version of the same word - baptism. There are other words in the Bible that have got the same treatment apostle (messenger), deacon (servant). Doing this creates mystique where no mystique belongs. So what does the Greek baptizo mean. To dunk. It's a word that was used when dyeing cloth. You dunk the cloth into the dye to colour it – it's immersed, submerged. Getting dunked is less elegant than get baptised isn't it?

So why did Philip dunk the Ethiopian, and why do we still dunk people?

Because Jesus wants us to

Because it's the witness of the New Testament

Because Jesus set an example

Because it's a witness to what has happened to us

Because God wants to encounter us through it

What about you? Not baptised yet? Why not? Don't give me that answer, give it to Jesus?

Do we have to be baptised?

This winter, you don't need to have heating on in your house to survive

This winter, you don't need to have a roof on your car to get from A to B

But common sense tells you that life is much better when you've got the heat on at home and when your car has a roof. The quality of life rises. So does the spiritual quality of our lives when we are baptised.

Baptism is a command of Jesus that helps us grow in our relationship with Him. It's an act of obedience. Baptism is an essential for Christians, let's not treat it like it's an optional extra. If you've never been baptised, what about you? Jesus is waiting for your answer!