

One of the points of slight friction that sometimes pops up in the Morris family is what we do when we see street entertainers. For myself, I like to stop and watch, but from the earliest days of our marriage, Gillian always wants to move on. It took me years to find out that she lives in fear that she will be grabbed from the crowd to be the ‘magician or jugglers assistant’. For me, I will make a confession, my fear is coming across a street preacher when I am walking down the high street in my collar. I take my hat off to them – or I would if I had one! But I find myself wanting to walk the other way and I cringe slightly when I see them standing on their soapbox, or with their large pad of paper on some sort of stand drawing corny pictures that are trying to teach people about faith in Jesus Christ. It’s just not me – or perhaps it is me and I need to get over it?

Is it nerves? After all, George Jessel said that “The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public.” And Mark Twain said, “There are two types of speakers: those who are nervous and those who are liars.”

And you might argue that the New and Old Testament is full of occasions when people preached the Good News outside. Jesus himself spoke in the Temple and in the Synagogue, but mostly he preached to the crowds that followed him. And he pulled no punches either – the parables and stories he told were not intended to ‘go down well’ – they hit the locals square between the eyes. I cannot emphasise strongly enough that the double meanings that are in so many of the parables were DEEPLY offensive to the Jewish leaders of his day.

And here in the Acts of the Apostles that we heard read today, we have another example of Philip, preaching outside the church – when he talks to the Ethiopian Eunuch - in the open air as it were. But perhaps the context of the story explains something about why I might cringe when I see the preacher in the High Street but also challenges us as to what we should be doing to take opportunities to preach the Gospel and spread the good news of how God loves us and is ready to meet us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:

"As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth." The quotation is from Isaiah 53:7-8 and is important as the first definite application of the passage to Jesus as the Suffering Servant. Before the coming of Christ, the Jews did understand that this was a Messianic passage and that the sufferings of the servant was a prophesy of the sufferings of their Messiah. Later some assumed the suffering servant to refer to the prophet and others to the people of Israel. And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?"

This quotation from Isaiah was perplexing to the eunuch. He knew the passage described an individual, but was it Isaiah or someone else? His confusion was understandable, since even the Jewish experts were divided on the meaning of this passage. Some believed the slaughtered sheep represented Israel; others thought Isaiah was referring to himself, and others thought the Messiah was Isaiah’s subject.

And the Eunuch was a seeker – he’d been up to Jerusalem and was almost certainly one of those who were looking for meaning of life and faith in the one God. And there are people around us – people who we meet day by day and week by week who are looking for meaning and explanations about what God is saying. Philip recognised that the Eunuch was looking for the truth about God and responded; I am well aware of how difficult this can be sometimes.

A pastor gave a message on home evangelism and one family thought they had better do something to witness to Jesus. So they invited their neighbours to dinner the following Friday night. When it came to the meal, the believers were keen to show their neighbours that they upheld Christian standards in their home. So she asked little 5-year-old Johnny to say grace. Little Johnny was a bit shy. “I don’t know what to say” There was an awkward pause, followed by a reassuring smile from the boy’s mother. “Well darling,” she said, “Just say what Daddy said at breakfast this morning.” Obediently, the boy repeated, “Oh God, we’ve got those horrible people from next door coming to dinner tonight.”

Now I talked about getting the heeby jeebies when I see a street preacher, and the first lesson we can learn from Philip and the Ethiopian is that he was led by the spirit. In the High Street, it's the context that gets me – I am delighted when I'm put in a situation where I am prompted to open people's eyes and minds to the love of God. I'm just not too sure that standing in the High Street with a megaphone is the right place for me. It might be right for others... The real point is that we need to be open to God's prompting. Preaching the Gospel – telling the Good News that God loves you and is accessible to us personally in and through the risen Jesus Christ Son of God is something we can ALL do.

The second is that we need to be ready and equipped to jump up into the chariot and ask the questions and be ready to explain. I suspect that Philip was invited up by the Eunuch because he was obviously a person of spiritual integrity and authority. There's no magic to achieving that status. Say your prayers, read the bible, come and be fed in word and sacrament Sunday by Sunday and allow God to mould you and sanctify you for the work he's prepared for you. One of the things that we are going to be doing in our parish over the coming months is putting on courses – simple straightforward courses on introductions to Christianity. Some of you might feel that you need a bit of a refresher – or a bit of basic learning about our faith. You might need some confidence and knowledge to be able to answer some simple questions about what it means to be a follower of Jesus – to be able to proclaim Jesus as Lord. For others, you might want to be able to invite people to come along to a few meetings to explore faith. You might not feel confident about asking someone to come to church on a Sunday morning but they might be open to coming to someone's house for a coffee and a chat or 'Prosecco and proclamation'.

Philip saw the Eunuch reading Isaiah and responded to an opportunity to tell the good news. Today, we might ask in our prayers to help us to be open to the opportunities that God gives to us to share the Gospel. To have the wisdom and knowledge and spiritual resources to allow people to recognise God in us. For whatever you or I say or preach, it's God that is acting – we merely need to be ready to respond to his call and be His mouthpiece. For it is God who calls and God who brings salvation and hope to people who seek after Him.