

ACTS 8:26-40
WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

There are a few fishermen who have given up their trade for now, small businessmen, successful in what they did, with the head office by the lake, and maybe a shop in the city where they bring their fish. Some others are tax collectors, outcasts in their society, collaborators with the occupying power, greedy, making themselves rich at our expense. Others we know little about: they are not quite anonymous because we know their names but we know nothing else about them; some are brothers, but short-tempered brothers; one will nearly compromise the enterprise, and is also a thief! There are only twelve of them, hand-picked admittedly, but there are only 12 of them, with some others who are hangers-on. Is it not very promising? What is their chance of 'success'? To these people Jesus says "*You are...*" (*Matthew 5:14*) "We'd like something smaller, please; the light of our village, or our home-town, even our city! The world is too much!"

Of course, this is a conversation that took place between Jesus and His disciples. This small, slightly disparate group of twelve men, is described by Jesus; notice that He doesn't say "*you will be the light of the world.*" He says "*you are...*" (*Matthew 5:14*) This is a challenge they have to live up to, but this is who they are as Jesus's followers. To a bunch of scruffy and perhaps rather astonished disciples (par Wright) He says "*you are the light of the world.*" If any of them knew their bible, the idea would not be new. They would know that 700 years before God had spoken about a servant who would come and who would be a light, but not just to Israel: "*It is...*" (*Isaiah 49:6*) The Servant of God would come into the world to be 'light' and not just for one nation, but for the whole world. Jesus is that servant: "*I am...*" (*John 8:12*) The disciples and the church carry that legacy, to reflect Jesus's light to the world.

Lots of Churches read this and are overwhelmed by this idea. In Scotland most churches today are much more aware of being small and weak rather than embarking on this great missionary enterprise. We read these words of Jesus and work out what they mean and we feel that we're just not up to task. We might have an idea that we can have some influence on our own community, on the place where we live and work, but not the world; that's too big! Yet, here's the thing: this group of people, scruffy, uneducated, yet called by Jesus, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, changed the world! That's not even an exaggeration. They embarked on a mission that was to change the world forever and for good. They spent their lives telling people about Jesus and people reacted and responded to them, some by believing, some not, but the world was changed by these people being the light of the world.

Philip is a brilliant example of this mission. There was a Philip who was part of the original twelve; there was a Philip appointed in Acts 6 to help with the poor and who then became this evangelist; we're not sure if they are one and the same or two different people. Philip in Acts 8 is an evangelist telling people about Jesus and has been drawing crowds, but now God sends him to a lonely, desert road through Gaza, the road that leads from Jerusalem to Africa. He meets a chariot, bouncing its way south, with someone important. This man is reading something, and we discover that it is a copy of Isaiah and that the Ethiopian is reading and trying to understand what he is reading, but he needs help. "*Do you...*" (*Acts 8:30f*) What a good answer, so Philip travels in the chariot with this important man, this chancellor-of-the-exchequer kind of person. He is reading Isaiah 53, the place where the servant is described suffering and will die and he wonders who this is. "*Tell me...*" (*Acts 8:34f*) He only reads part of the story so Philip tells him the rest, about Jesus who came and who suffered and was crucified and who was raised from the dead. Philip is a brilliant

example of taking an opportunity that is presented and telling someone the story of Jesus.

The Ethiopian's reaction is fantastic. "*As they...*" (Acts 8:36) This reaction is all about faith in Jesus. He has reacted to the story Philip has told him; he has embraced the story, and obviously thinks it is a great story; he has believed Jesus, the person at the heart of the story and now he wants to demonstrate that faith and commit his life to Jesus and the outward sign of that faith and commitment is baptism. Here is a man whose life is changed by what he heard and who will take that new faith with him into Africa, into the palace of Candace, into a place where that faith had never been heard or seen before. Philip is a light to one man and in being the light to this one man, has become the light to a whole new part of the world; the gospel has gone to the nations in a new way, a step towards "the ends of the earth!"

This is the last we hear of Philip. "*Philip travelled...*" (Acts 8:40) He went on his way, led by the Spirit to new places and new people. His most famous story is this one-to-one encounter with a man in his chariot; this is the story Luke chooses to record in the story of the church because it is a story of a significant encounter; it changed one man's life and that one man took the gospel with him and the light spread. We presume that Philip went on his way, still doing the work of an evangelist, unrecorded, unnoticed, except that God was at work through him in other places and in the lives of other people. This is so often way God works, in ways that often go unnoticed, unrecorded, God working in the hearts and minds of people who hear the gospel and whose lives begin to change. So many people come through our doors over the space of a year, some we know and they stay, some come once on holiday and we never see them again; we hope and pray that these encounters are significant because they hear the story, but we may never know.

Who are we talking about when we tell the gospel story? The answer is Jesus, but before we look at the right answer, there are a couple of wrong answers. Sometimes we talk about 'the church': we say to people "come to church" as if that is the end of the story; if people come to church that will be fine and we will have achieved our aim by having more people in our building and more people are our services and events. I visited one church recently where their clear strategy was to get more people inside their building; that is a laudable enough aim in itself; but there was no strategy for presenting people with more than just a nice church, a venue for their concerts. We have a name for being a church that is 'busy' which seems a nice accolade, but is that really the story we're wanting to tell? A busy Church with a nice building?

We can also talk about ourselves. Last year we ran a *Lost for Words* course and part of that course is about story-telling, telling the gospel story and telling our story. Telling our story as Christians is meant to connect with people where they are so that they see how the story of our faith and the story of the gospel meet up and connect. The danger of that is that we build up our story so that we are the centre of attention and that somehow our story is also exaggerated. I have been in Christian gatherings when there has been a clear element of competition among church members in air: "We've had more conversions than you; we had 500 people at our watchnight service; we had 10 new members by profession of faith; our church budget in 200K, much larger than yours! My conversion story is more dramatic than yours!" I may have exaggerated a little, but that does happen. Who are we talking about? We're talking about ourselves as if we are the story and it ends with us! It is a fine balance between telling the stories of church life to let people know we are here and between boasting and showing off so that people think well of us and us alone!

The story is not about 'the Church'; the story is not about us; the story is about Jesus. He has to be centre-stage in everything we are and do in the mission God has given us. Our mission is to lead people to Jesus so that people think well of Him. We tell our story so that it reflects well on His grace and love for us; we tell the story of the Church as we are inspired to worship and serve because Jesus is fantastic! Jesus is the light of the world; He has come to show us what God is like; He has come to save the world; He is Lord of heaven and earth; He is the centre of time and eternity; He has the whole world in His hands; He has died and is raised to complete the mission God had given Him. This is the story that we are called to tell so that people believe Jesus. People might think well of us – that's great! People might think we are a fantastic church – that's great! But that's not the end of the story; we are only great, we are only a fantastic church by the grace of God at work in us. That's the story people need to hear, the story of Jesus to believe Him.

We are called to be mirrors! Our calling is to reflect Jesus to the world. He is the light of the world; we are the light of the world. We reflect His light; we show the world what Jesus is like. How do we do our job as mirrors? First of all, we tell the story of Jesus to people when the opportunity comes along; that's scary and we talked about that a couple of weeks ago; here it is again; we tell the story of Jesus so that people hear about Him. Secondly, we also do our job as mirrors by the kind of people we are: being good people, people who love, people with faith and hope in our hearts, people who are wounded but keep believing, people who are at times weak and vulnerable but keep the faith – this is how we reflect Jesus to the world, by the kind of people we are. Do people see Jesus in us? The answer is "not as much as they should", but the challenge remains for us to be people who reflect Jesus by the way we live, speak and behave.

Did the bunch of scruffy, astonished disciples know what it meant to be the light of the world? I doubt it! But they discovered that they were involved in something that would change their world forever. They discovered that God is for the world, that God loves the world and that Jesus died to save the world – they told the story and they reflected Jesus to the people they met. We're not sure that we're qualified to be the light of the world; we know that Jesus is great, but us – how are we meant to tell His story? How are we meant to reflect Jesus to our world? Jesus has called us; He is the story; we are to point the world to Him. We need to learn to be a mirror-church; we need to learn to be mirror-Christians, reflecting Jesus to the people we meet in the place where we live. It is a fantastic calling – let's be what we are, the light of the world!