

## **Followers Of The Way**

Ancient Discipleship For Modern Christians

### **“Be open to the Holy Spirit and listen”**

Naomi Pendle

*Acts 8: 26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian*

As I've been praying over of the last few years, as the ROCK project has developed and as we've been through different seasons, but also, as I prepared for this service, God's kept giving me a picture of our church building, which we are looking up the hill at now. But I keep seeing it as being surrounded by growth by plants and flowers, and it really being a living church. And I had this picture again, as I was preparing for today. And I had this reminder of a need to really prepare the ground as we go through winter, and then on into spring. And we think about next summer, when we will go back to the to the church on the hill. And this is a time of preparation, just as you would prepare your garden, you keep it safe through the winter, you might cover it and keep it strong and bring it in, you might put cloth over the ground to keep the soil warm to keep the seeds underneath protected. And then as spring comes, you might really cultivate. And I had this really strong sense that this is what the season is about, preparing with anticipation for when we go back to the big church that we would really grow. And Finola, who normally goes to the later service at 11, kindly drew this beautiful image for us, and we will reflect on it later. So I just mention it now and we will come back to it.

This morning, I am talking about the Holy Spirit and listening. And so I have these three questions that I will come back to at the end. So have you forgotten the Holy Spirit? Do you know His voice? And will you follow him now? And the followers of the way book starts with this amazing image of these early Christian missionaries in the British Isles in the ninth century. They were missionaries like St. Aidan, St. Columbus, who were coming from Ireland and coming to England to spread the word that we are the children of, 1000 years later.

And the story that is told in the Followers of the Way is of them getting into small boats and they would pray and they would fast. And then they would go out to the rivers and the sea and see where their boats would carry them. And so we have this incredible image of a group of people who are willing to trust God and that was actually part of a much bigger philosophy that they would listen every day and that every day they would seek God and they would expect him to speak. And they would go where he wanted them to go, not just in the big decisions, but in the every day decisions about how they were living their life.

So today we're looking at the story of Philip and the eunuch. So I will mainly actually speak about Philip. But then I will briefly go to the Ethiopian eunuch and then at the end, we will have a short time to listen. This story of Philip and the eunuch is incredible because it takes us to the Holy Spirit. But it also takes us to Jesus and the heart of the gospel, to that incredible prophecy from Isaiah that is telling us what Jesus will come and do. So in this passage, we have the visible Holy Spirit and the demand to listen to him, but also the hope and the good news of the Messiah. So who is Philip? In Acts 6 we hear that Philip is one of the seven who was chosen to serve the tables, which sounds like a rather mundane job, and I think it's a reminder that actually some of the most powerful and spirit filled people sometimes are the ones that seem to do the mundane jobs. He's chosen with the others because some widows are not sure what portion of the food they will get. So Philip is one of the seven along with Stephen and they are chosen to help make sure food is equally and fairly distributed. Then in Acts 7 we hear about Stephen. Stephen's incredible witness and a declaration of the gospel, but also his stoning. So, by chapter 7 you have the scattering of the church, Stephen has been stoned, the first kind of martyr of this early church, a really visible martyr and the church is being scattered. And then it's in Acts 8 that we hear a bit more about Philip. Philip, in that moment of scattering, feels called to go to Samaria. And Samaria feels like a sensible and good place to go, partly because they are moving out from Jerusalem, but also because Jesus clearly commanded that they should move beyond Jerusalem, they should move to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And so Philip is fulfilling that calling. So in Act 1, it says, but you will receive the power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. And you will be my witnesses to Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And so by this point, they have received the Spirit.

Pentecost has happened. And initially they haven't moved so far. But as Stephen's Martyrdom happens, and as they are caught by the Spirit, they move out beyond Jerusalem, to Judea, but also to Samaria and they are witnessing to a community that is on the edge of the Jewish community they are somehow Jewish, and somehow not. They are moving beyond the boundaries of where they were previously at home. And Philip is leading and is having a very, very successful ministry in Samaria, when we meet him, but there is this big question, a big ongoing question of what were 'the ends of the earth'. Jesus has said, You should go to the ends of the earth to spread the good news. But where are those ends? We see Phillip in this story where suddenly an angel says to him, goes south to that desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. And so he is sent to this desert road, you can see it on that map, away from Samaria, interrupting his mission and a mission, which was clearly in line with Jesus calling. But in this moment, he hears it very clearly, he hears from an angel and he must go. So Philip was called down, he was called from his mission. In summary, it wasn't that the mission in Samaria ended, but in that moment, it was interrupted, and he was called down to this desert road. Then the Holy Spirit says to him, go to that chariot and stay near it. So he's had this call from the angel, but then he also hears the Spirit leading him, the Spirit telling him to go alongside this chariot. And this is a significant moment, because who is in the chariot? who knows who's there? We know, because the story later tells us, it's this official from Ethiopia. Philip doesn't know what it's going to lead to. He doesn't know what kind of person he's about to share the good news with, but he's so in tune with the spirit that he's willing to listen to his voice in the middle of a desert. And he's gone to what might seem a very silly place. And he's willing to follow the spirits leading to go up to this chariot when he doesn't know who's in it. So then the question for me is, Do you know His voice? Will you let Him guide you? And I don't know. If I said to you, when did you last hear the Holy Spirit? When did you last hear God? I don't know what you would think or what your reaction would be. I think some of us will be filled with trust and joy and a sense of kind of anticipation and excitement. We've heard God recently. And we're used to listening to God and the Holy Spirit, but I think for many of us, there's other reactions as well for some of us as a sense of skepticism. Like, do I know that I'm hearing God, does God really speak to me? And for the others as a sense of being left out? I think over time, we can feel like 'God I needed you to speak to me in that moment and actually I felt let down that you didn't'.

Or maybe other people seem to hear God a lot but I never seem to hear him. I would love to hear the Holy Spirit like Philip did 2000 years ago, I'd love to be led to that chariot. But sometimes we can feel as if that's maybe not for us.

But looking back through the Gospels and the book of Acts, it's good to remember who the Holy Spirit is. Jesus makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is the Comforter, the advocate, the helper, He is the promised one. He is not someone who will condemn us, but he is someone who will bring us to Jesus. In Romans 8, Paul talks about how God's spirit and our Spirit will speak together about us being the children of God. If we know we are the children of God, our Spirit has spoken with His Spirit; you have known the Holy Spirit in you and it has confirmed to you who you are as a child of God. But Jesus also says that we can expect to hear him, we can expect to see visions, we can expect to keep hearing his voice. And we should long for that and wait for that. And I'd say to you, if you feel left out, if you feel like God has spoken, I would just remind you that God loves you. And he would say to keep asking because if you ask he will give, if you seek you will find and if you knock, the door will be open. And that passage in Luke is explicitly about the Holy Spirit. If you ask for the Holy Spirit to speak to you, if you seek Him, if you knock, and sometimes that can be incredible disappointment, but keep asking and keep seeking. But then sometimes I think we can feel skeptical. And actually it's good to question. When we think we've heard the voice of God, it is good to question it and think, How do I know it is the voice of God? How do I know it is not something else. And first of all, we know God is consistent. He is always the same, he is unchanging. And so he will never say something that is inconsistent with the biblical account. We know God because we read about him in the Bible. That's where we find his character. That's why we find who he is, we know he leads us to Jesus. And so if the Spirit is leading us anywhere, other than there, other than to Jesus, other than to the God of the Bible, we know it is not from God. But there are other ways to know and be confident: to speak to people who know God and can advise us, but also to learn his voice and listen to Him. Jesus says the sheep of my pasture know my voice.

Many of you know I spent quite a lot of time in South Sudan. So in South Sudan, there are sheep and there are goats, but there's actually a lot of cattle herding. And so if you think about an animal knowing their masters voice, it was in this context that I realised how powerful that was. So in South Sudan, you have large cattle camps, sometimes they're 3000, cattle, sometimes even like five to 10,000 cattle. And people will be amongst them herding them, they have a much closer relationship to their cattle than we do, they will sleep in these cattle camps. But these spread out for vast amounts of space. And I remember one of the first times I went to a cattle camp, and we'd been recording songs. And in South Sudan, young men who are herding the cattle like this, they will often compose songs or have composed for them songs for an individual cow, because they spend so much time with their cows, they're quite treasured. And so there will be a cow and, and that cow, they will sing over a very specific song. But also the cow knows their own owner's voice. You know, there are many, many people in the cattle camp and many, many cows. And this man started singing this song. And then from out of this massive herd of cattle, this one cow came, he knew his masters voice and he knew the song.

But it was just amazing to see this cow come from a herd. And I think that is what we're called to do. We're called to know God's voice enough and the spirits voice enough that when He speaks to us, it wouldn't be an unfamiliar voice, but that actually, he can call us out from a crowd that we would know his voice well enough to do that. So the question comes; do you listen to him enough, where do you go to listen to him, and I'm sure we all have our places. these are my favorite places, I have a chair in my room, which actually was from a vicarage decades and decades ago that someone gave to an old lady and then somehow it came into our family. It's bit worn down, needs refurbishing, but that's my place I sit and listen to God. And also people love walking, we have amazing hills around Weston. I love to walk up for 20 minutes and listen. But there are other places. One of the main places God spoke to me in my life was what was in the church here, and then in a traffic jam. So I was praying, and I was at the end of my time at university, and I didn't know what to do next. And I was at an evening service up in the church. And God laid a word on my heart, a word and I wrote it down. I didn't know what it meant. It wasn't in English, it was just a bit weird. But I thought, oh, gosh, I'll write it down. And I googled it later.

And it was a place in South Sudan. And I didn't have any connections with South Sudan at the time. But I thought, Okay. At the time I was at university so I went to the mission people in that church and said, Well, what do I do with this? I don't know, this might just be a bit crazy. And so they said, well, let's see if we can find anyone that can take you on mission amongst our networks and partners. And they couldn't. Instead the only people they could find that would take me at the last minute was someone in Morocco. So I thought, oh, maybe I misunderstood God. Maybe I mis Googled it. Maybe it wasn't a word from God. So I ended up going to Morocco for the summer. And unknown to me as soon as I got to the first meal of the evening with this family; it was an American family in Morocco, the father said that he'd spent his first few years of mission work in South Sudan. And so although I spent that summer in Morocco, I learned a lot about South Sudan. And then it was confirmed to me in a traffic jam. So, I had, by that point, met Baroness Cox and that seemed like an opportunity to go, but I had no money. I was in my early 20s. And I was sitting in a traffic jam and I felt like God said 'turn over the radio stations'. Well, you know, maybe I was a bit bored of whatever I was listening to So I changed the radio station and on that radio station there were adverts. I was like, well, I'll just listen to the adverts. I think the traffic was moving forward and I couldn't keep changing over the radio. One of those adverts was about an opportunity to apply for funding with Vodafone, and Vodafone ended up funding me to go to South Sudan for my first year. And if I hadn't turned over the radio in that moment and I hadn't heard that advert, I wouldn't have had that provision to go. So just an incredible confirmation over time, but also different ways of God speaking.

So let's get back to Philip. I do wonder, would Philip have gone if he knew where he was going? Would he have gone if he'd known what the ends of the earth were. Philip, you know, was in this moment very focused on Samaria. But God was calling him just in this moment to talk to this Ethiopian eunuch, to take the good news beyond the ends of the earth. And Ethiopia at that time is not what we imagined Ethiopia to be today. It probably covered most of North Africa, anywhere south of the Roman Empire's control. So included Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, but it was also very, very wealthy. This is an extract from an historical account, 'where South inclines westwards, the parts of the world stretching further towards the sunset as Ethiopia.'

This produces gold in abundance and huge elephants and all sorts of wild trees and ebony, the tallest and handsomest and longest lived people.' But actually in this moment, it's only about 50 years before that that the Ethiopian Queen had defeated the Roman army in North Africa. The Ethiopian kingdom was incredibly strong. This was a time when the Brits were not doing so well, you know, not successful in defeating the Roman army, but the Ethiopians were. And so you have a queen of Ethiopia, who's incredibly powerful, who's now got incredibly strong trade deals with the Roman Empire. And so this official, who belonged to the queen of Ethiopia was probably an incredibly powerful man controlling trade deals and wealth and money. And Philip is being sent to him with that kind of willingness to listen to the spirit to go to someone that he had no right in human eyes to speak to. But he still went because he felt that strong call. And I think it's really interesting, actually, maybe if Philip had been given a map and told 'You've got to send this message to reach to Ethiopia and the ends of the earth', I wonder if he'd have gone. But actually, God leads him step by step, he leads him to the chariot, he takes him then to the official and he doesn't necessarily know what he's gonna do. He doesn't know the consequences of what he's doing, but because he's led step by step, he has this massive impact on this powerful official, and on the spread of the gospel.

So would you notice if the Spirit took you on a different route? Are you listening to the spirit enough, like Philip was to be led, even temporarily away from your main call, to do whatever else he wants you to do?

So then just briefly to mention the eunuch, the official. So he is reading this passage from Isaiah: 'he was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and there's a lamb before he shares his silence, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice, who can speak of his descendants, for his life was taken from the earth'. So in this moment, that official is puzzling over this passage from Isaiah. We know he's somehow seeking God because he's been up to Jerusalem, and he's reading these different passages. But he's puzzled over this passage. Just at that moment, that timing, he's reading an incredible prophecy of the coming of Jesus. These kinds of passages from Isaiah seem to sum up the whole gospel.

This is the passage that comes before this extract that we see the eunuch reading: 'that he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him. and by his wounds, we are healed. We are all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' That the eunuch would be reading in that moment, when Philip was led to him, this kind of summary of the gospel: that we have been led astray, we don't listen to Jesus enough, we do wander from the path, we don't have that kind of close listening that maybe we should have, we are not in tune to him, we are not doing what Philip does and in that every moment being willing. I know I'm not. And it's hard and so easy to not listen in every moment. But God's grace is big enough. He knew it would be, he was prophesying from hundreds of years before that he would come and rescue us. And of course , that passage in Isaiah is the summary of what Jesus would do. But what Jesus had just done a few months before Philip is speaking. This kind of spilling out of the gospel that Jesus knows that we would go astray, but he is our shepherd, and he will come after us, He will leave the 99 and chase us down. But that doesn't come without a cost and he knew he would have to die, that he would have to be pierced for our transgressions and that he would die on the cross for us. And that's what he is able to explain to the eunuch and the promise he is able to give him: that the Holy Spirit leads Philip to lead the eunuch to the gospel, to Jesus' death to Jesus' promise that He will bring us back to the flock. But what I also think is amazing is that the eunuch heard Jesus and the spirit too, and he acted. He demanded to be baptised immediately. When I think about Philip, I think of all the excuses I would have made not to go to the desert road between Gaza and Jerusalem. This is a very silly idea, and not to go to a chariot of a very rich person, a very wealthy, powerful person. And I think about the eunuch. I also think gosh, I would have surely thought of excuses about why I would not want to suddenly be baptised or why maybe I need to consult my Queen or I need to think about other things, but he hears the gospel and he responds immediately and he demands that he is baptised and Philip baptizes him on the road.

So now we come to a time when we can listen, and I just returned to those questions again and ask you; Have you forgotten the Holy Spirit? Do you know His voice? Would you recognize him if he was calling you like the shepherd when he calls the sheep the sheep knows his voice and will you follow him now?