

WYLD GREEN URC
Thoughts for the Week commencing 2nd May 2021
This week's thoughts are written by John Turney
Based on Acts 8 26-40 and 1 John 4 7-21

Monday and Tuesday

Bible verses: Acts 8; 26-30

Philip and the Ethiopian Official

²⁶ An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get ready and go south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This road is not used nowadays.)

²⁷⁻²⁸ So Philip got ready and went. Now an Ethiopian eunuch, who was an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia, was on his way home. He had been to Jerusalem to worship God and was going back home in his carriage. As he rode along, he was reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to that carriage and stay close to it.” ³⁰ Philip ran over and heard him reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah

He asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Imagine this: you are newly arrived in Britain from an African country. English is not your native language. You have the means to hire a car and to go and explore the country before deciding where to live. (I know; this is unrealistic and totally impossible in these days of restrictions and lockdowns – but imagine!); you are in the West Country parked in a seaside car park overlooking one of the glorious views that the country offers so often. You are reading the Bible, because it is part of your background and your faith and reading in English aloud to yourself because it helps your understanding of the language. A stranger approaches the car and asks you in a friendly manner, “do you understand what you are reading?”

Would you, in this age, in this prejudiced, sometimes violent world of ours, knowing as you do about racial intolerance, immediately close the windows, lock the doors, start the engine and drive off quickly or would you take a chance and allow yourself to engage in conversation? I guess that most people would do the former. It would take considerable strength of character to stay and answer the questioner.

The Ethiopian eunuch, although an important man in his own country, would have no status in Israel. He would be considered as a gentile and the fact that he was a eunuch would set him no higher than a Samaritan. (see Leviticus 21 v17-20). His saving grace was that he wanted to worship the Jewish God. He was classified as a ‘God-fearing gentile and could go into the temple as far as the Court of the Gentiles but no further.

It is thought that Philip is not the apostle Philip but one of the seven helpers recruited by the apostles. Nevertheless Philip had been blessed with the power of the Holy Spirit and was equally charged with fulfilling Jesus’ challenge on the day of Ascension, ‘to be

witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth'. He had been evangelising in Samaria and was ready to take Jesus' message to anywhere in the world. The Holy Spirit guided him to the Ethiopian's carriage and gave him the opportunity to make contact.

Bible verses: Acts 8 31-40

³¹ *The official replied, "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?" And he invited Philip to climb up and sit in the carriage with him. ³² The passage of scripture which he was reading was this:*

"He was like a sheep that is taken to be slaughtered, like a lamb that makes no sound when its wool is cut off. He did not say a word. ³³ He was humiliated, and justice was denied him. No one will be able to tell about his descendants, because his life on earth has come to an end."

³⁴ *The official asked Philip, "Tell me, of whom is the prophet saying this? Of himself or of someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak; starting from this passage of scripture, he told him the Good News about Jesus. 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. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away. The official did not see him again, but continued on his way, full of joy. ⁴⁰ Philip found himself in Azotus; he went on to Caesarea, and on the way he preached the Good News in every town.*

It is obvious that that Philip had approached the Ethiopian in a friendly, helpful manner and guided by the Holy Spirit, willingly took advantage of the invitation to come and sit in the carriage and explain at least the book of Isaiah in what we call the Old Testament. Think yourself back into Philip's era. You know well the Old Testament. But you are now living through the events which Luke is describing sometimes learning about them at second hand through having listened to Peter and the other Apostles. You have given up your old life, have been baptised and have accepted the story of Christ and his sacrifice on the cross and subsequent resurrection and inspired by the Holy Spirit are now keen to spread the gospel (the good news) of Jesus to the wider world. What an opportunity!

Isaiah is not the easiest book to understand especially when trying to relate his prophecies to Christ's day. But Philip was travelling willingly with the Ethiopian towards the latter's homeland (thought to be about 1,600 miles from Jerusalem) and obviously related the story of Jesus in such a compelling and simple way that the Ethiopian became overwhelmed with the desire to be baptised. They stopped at a watercourse and Philip baptised the Ethiopian, both of them being fully immersed.

Philip's work was done and the Holy Spirit whisked him away to his next assignment. The Ethiopian was now a Christian and full of joy; commentaries on this passage tell us that he became a missionary for the Word of God in Ethiopia.

Now sit back and think whether you could have done what Philip did! This is to pass on your love of God and Jesus his son to others and either strengthen their Christian belief or convert them to a love of Christ and all he stands for. Many people have experienced this wonderful story from their contemporaries and have gone on to become missionaries in their own communities or have travelled further afield carrying the Good News of Jesus to distant and unfamiliar communities.

Prayer for today: Dear Lord, thank you for Jesus and all those who have brought his wonderful message to us. Give us the will-power, the strength and love to emulate Philip, even if only in a small way, to pass on your message to others.

Wednesday- Friday

Bible verses: 1 John 4 7-21

God Is Love

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him. ¹⁰ This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.

¹¹ Dear friends, if this is how God loved us, then we should love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us. ¹³ We are sure that we live in union with God and that he lives in union with us, because he has given us his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and tell others that the Father sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ If we declare that Jesus is the Son of God, we live in union with God and God lives in union with us. ¹⁶ And we ourselves know and believe the love which God has for us.

God is love, and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them. ¹⁷ Love is made perfect in us in order that we may have courage on the Judgment Day; and we will have it because our life in this world is the same as Christ's. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear.

So then, love has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid, because fear has to do with punishment.

¹⁹ We love because God first loved us. ²⁰ If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. For we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love others, whom we have seen. ²¹ The command that Christ has given us is this: whoever loves God must love others also.

What a wonderful message! Never mind that it has a label identifying that it is for Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. It is for every day of the week, for every week, for

the whole year, in fact for every year, indeed for all time. It has been called ‘the other love chapter’, the better known one being Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

God is love. We know this from many other examples in the New Testament, where we follow the life of his only Son who allowed himself to be sacrificed for us for the redemption of sins and rose again to prove God’s love for us. He created our world and mankind and we should repay him by loving others, as well as loving God for what he did for us.

There are of course many kinds of love and the Greeks had several words for it (of course). I still remember clearly a sermon given by Ken Chippindale (Minister before Sue) in which he described and commented upon the three main Greek words for love. *Eros* is used for sexual love; *philia* is brotherly or love for the family or friends and *agape* is used widely in the New Testament for Christian love, for the love of God and for all people. *Agape* expresses how God showed his love for us by sending Jesus to us to be a living example of love and ultimately by his sacrifice on the cross to atone for all our sins. The best definition then of God’s universal love is found in the New Testament. Some might say that the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is the most succinct and meaningful (*Love is patient, love is kind.....*) But John’s Gospel seems to sum up love in a universal way when he quotes Jesus’ new commandment:

“And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

We were frequently reminded of this in the days when the choir delighted in singing John Ireland’s wonderful anthem ‘*Greater love hath no man than this*’

‘*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.*

Love is strong as death.

Greater love hath no man than this ,that a man lay down his life for his friends.’

So read these words from John’s first letter and the words to John Ireland’s anthem and 1 Corinthians 13 and John’s Gospel, chapters 13 and 15 and make your love for Jesus and for your fellow human beings evident and real.

Hymn for today: Love divine, all loves excelling,
 Joy of heaven to earth come down;
 Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
 All thy faithful mercies crown!
 Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
 Pure unbounded love Thou art;
 Visit us with Thy salvation;
 Enter every trembling heart. (Words by Charles Wesley R&S 663)