

## Sermon Archive 342

Sunday 2 May, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 8: 26-40

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Poor Andrew Meek, Assistant Minister at Oxford Terrace Baptist Church! The poor man was given the task of chairing a panel discussion about hospitality in post-Massacre Ōtautahi Christchurch. I think the idea of the discussion was to explore whether terrorist acts against one sector of the community had unified the wider city as a whole. They are us. We are one. Haere mai, hospitality.

Trying to kick the evening off with a feel-good question about "belonging" in Ōtautahi, Andrew asked each of the three panelists why they chose to live here. The first panelist was Victoria Owolabi - who'd been born in Nigeria but lived a while in South Africa. Things had got a bit violent in South Africa, so she and her husband decided to relocate. Her "first choice" country was Australia, but it didn't work out, so she ended up in Christchurch. She enjoys living here - particularly when she gets to explain to well-meaning Cantabrians that her command of the English language isn't such that they need to shout at her, and that while she *is* African, she isn't poor (and during her time in South Africa actually had servants).

The second panelist, Anglican priest Stephanie Robson, explained that she came here, I think, because her husband had landed a short-term job. It was always meant to be a temporary thing - do the job, then get back to somewhere further up North. But by the time the short-term job wound up, one of her children was settled at school. They decided to stay on until the end of the school year. Other cities had other schools. There was nothing special about this one, other than that it had become familiar. Settled year followed settled year, and kind of like dust settling, Stephanie settled. There was very little agency to it. It just kind of happened. Would you call that incidental, random?

The third panelist was your truly. I told Andrew - who by now was very eager to hear someone say that they enthusiastically had chosen to live here, that I came here because Knox Church was the only Presbyterian Church in the country

willing to take on a minister who was gay. "Lack of options, Andrew", I said. "Well, no options, really - it was Christchurch or nothing." Not wanting to crush Andrew's spirit totally, I did tell him that on my first trip here to meet the people of Knox, I found myself thinking "I wonder who they are - these people called Knox. Are they dull, or interesting? Are they generous, or mean? How **are** they? Are they kind?" What do they need? Could we do useful things together? I **did** wonder these things as first I came here. But, for Andrew, three out of three panelists just found ourselves kind of randomly "being here". No grand design. No cunning plan. No sense of directed purpose. Three out of three saying simply "it just kind of turned out this way".

Is that the normal dynamic for human life, I wonder? Only-choices and settling dust? No force in the organisation of our lives greater than the force of chance. Those we meet (the people of the place); the locals who come to shape us; social construction - - - as an accident of sliding doors? It's worth a thought.

-ooOoo-

The Ethiopian official has been in Jerusalem. We're told he's been there for worship. Not quite sure why he'd do that, but he has. And now that he has, he's taking the most straight forward way home again. This is not meant to be a momentous day, a world changing journey. It's just the most direct road home. We can kind of tell that he doesn't have anything special planned for the trip, no plans to meet anyone along the way. We know this because he's brought a book with him. Like many people who need to kill time on a train, plane or bus, he's got a book on his lap - something to kill the time while he's just sitting in that there chariot. The plan, (if you'd call a non-plan a "plan"), is just to pass through this featureless region and be somewhere else as directly as possible.

Again; is this perhaps a good motif for life as we know it? No great plan for today, other than travelling through it towards tomorrow. Moving through the temporary nothing, on our way back to the regularities of daily life. Not expecting anything much to happen today, nor engaging with anything ordained - carrying our books of distraction with us to stop us from getting bored. We've just ended up here. I'm not saying it's unpleasant. I mean the sun may be shining. We might see nice views from our chariot, enjoy a cheese

roll and coffee from a local café. Nothing to complain about, actually. It's just that it's not momentous - not anything that looks like grand-designed, God-given life-change. Why are you here? O, no reason really. It just sort of worked out that way.

Philip's world works differently. In Philip's world, angels whisper in his ear, telling him to go down South to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip's friends Peter and John are heading up North, and that would have been the obvious direction to take. But in Philip's world, angels tell him to go down South, in an opposite direction - so he does. I don't know whether, as he goes, he's dealing with thoughts about why this is a dumb strategy to take - heading off to somewhere where nothing's likely to happen. Not much can be expected, I expect, on a wilderness road. But in Philip's world, angels prompt you to do the most lateral things.

Having pursued the angel's prompting, Philip does indeed find himself on a road to nowhere (well, technically a road to the far distant horn of Africa). On the road he sees a chariot. On the barren landscape, it's likely hard to miss. Is this the kind of chariot you rush towards, to take a closer look? Like a coronation coach - kind of flash and decorated - designed with spectacle in mind? Or is it like an American Hummer? A vehicle designed to flex its unflexing metal muscle and intimidate those it goes by? We don't know. But it's certainly a surprise on the landscape.

The angel who's been speaking to Philip seems by now to have disappeared. Now speaking to Philip is "the Spirit". The Spirit says to Philip "go over to the chariot and join it". So, obedient to the heavenly prompting, Philip does.

There ensues a conversation between human beings that changes one of them forever. There's a conversation; there's a baptism; there's the sending of faith off to Ethiopia - which is about to become one of the most enduring organised Christian communities in the world. This has been a significant meeting, a life changing day. We're told that the Ethiopian goes on from this meeting "rejoicing". And, interestingly, as soon as the meeting is concluded, as soon as Philip has achieved this odd task not scheduled in his diary, the "Spirit of the Lord" is said to have snatched him away, so that he's seen no more - until he turns up again in Azotus - a seaside settlement back up North. It's as if this

interlude down South, with its life-changing encounter, was a deliberate diversion - ordered or inspired "by angels". I **did** say that Philip's world is different.

I wonder if there isn't some value for us, who probably reckon that life is a bit regular, and the people around us (who are our social-construction framework) are a bit random, considering Philip's way of being in the world. Being open to the possibility that ordinary time is sometimes interrupted by odd invitations to stumble into spiritual opportunity. Being open to the possibility that life is fuller of meetings that might not be by chance. Being open to the possibility that we are called to human encounters that can fashion us for deeper, more reflective, more baptised moments. What does that creed say? "We are not alone; we live in God's world".

Consider this. Today your diary included coming to church. In all likelihood, you've been to church before, and some of the people here (set around you) are people you know. There's nothing irregular or surprising here. But now you're here, does an angel invite you to come to the table? Not this table as such, but the table around which people have gathered for thousands of years - to affirm their place within the community of the re-created. Does the Spirit perhaps introduce you here to the table's host, to the One who breaks into life with grace and adventure? Is the day of unremarkable diary entries, or no entries at all, in fact a day of the presence of Christ among us? Is it a day of Philip-like possibility?

Or is Philip's world just too different from ours? Are we just where we are, among the random people around us, as a kind of settling of dust? Or is an angel speaking?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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