

It's All About Jesus

Sermon for St Paul's 25 July, 2004

Confession, they say, is good for the soul.

So I confess that I am preaching today for the wrong reasons. Or at least that's how it began.

Ken was showing us the list of topics he wanted to preach on during July. I saw that today he had chosen "Philip, the Evangelist" and the reading about the encounter with the Ethiopian on the way to Gaza. Since my name is Philip, and since I have been to Gaza, I said to Ken, "That's about me!"

For the next month, I wrestled with what I was supposed to say. I had three stories running through my head. The first story about this magician, Simon, and how he tries to buy a Holy Spirit franchise from the apostles. The second story is about Philip and this Ethiopian official who finds faith in Jesus on the road to Gaza. And the third story was about me, about the day I went to Gaza in the middle of a war.

What are these stories about? Why are they rattling around in my head? What message am I supposed to draw out of them? These questions went over and over again in my head right up until last Friday night.

On Friday night, I looked at the list of songs we would be singing in the 10 AM service. The last song is "It's All About Jesus."

Then I went back to these stories that we have heard this morning. The one about Simon, and the other about the Ethiopian official. And the light went on. There IS a common theme in these two stories, and even in my own story about going to Gaza in the middle of a war. The common theme is Jesus. Indeed, it's all about Jesus.

There is another saying, "Life is what happens while you were planning to do something else." I think the truly faithful Christian life is also like that.

Because it's not about us, it's all about Jesus.

It's not about what we plan to do, it's about what Jesus has in mind.

It's not about who we shall plan to see today, but whom Jesus brings across our path.

It's not about how we shall find the words, it's about what words Jesus gives us.

It's not about what we have experienced, but what bit of our experience Jesus wants to use today.

It's not about what we know, it's about what bit of knowledge Jesus wants to put to work.

It's not about me, it's all about Jesus.

If Shannon Noll were to come in here today and sing “What About Me?” we Christians ought to say, “It’s not about you, mate. It’s all about Jesus.”

And that’s the theme of these three stories. Let me show you how.

Turn to Acts 8.

First thing we notice is that the church is in crisis. I’ll bet no-one in the early church was expecting such dangerous opposition. Their senior minister had been murdered. Thugs were going from house to house, dragging people off to prison. The church was scattered. Everyone was going in different directions. The church was broken, divided and in a mess. It looked like the end.

But you know, Jesus knew what he was doing. Even if the church didn’t, he did. And it wasn’t about them, it was all about Jesus.

Philip goes off to a city in Samaria. He preaches and amazing things happen.

Now I reckon you can be pretty sure that no-one actually PLANNED to go to Samaria. Even though the apostles had travelled with Jesus and seen him talk to the odd Samaritan, and some of them were pretty odd, let’s face it. Even though Jesus had told this politically incorrect story about the Good Samaritan, for the first time in history putting the words “good” and “Samaritan” in the same sentence. I mean, the Jews despised the Samaritans. They called them half-casts because they descended from Assyrian people who had intermarried with Jews. They used to tell jokes about them:

What would you call 500 dead Samaritans at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee?

A good start.

What is the difference between a Samaritan and a catfish?

One is a slimy, bottom dwelling, scum sucker. The other is a fish.

What do you have when a Samaritan is buried up to his neck in sand?

Not enough sand.

As you can see, Jews did not like Samaritans, and Philip probably wouldn’t have ordinarily gone off to a city in Samaria to preach, except something outside his control, Jesus no less, sent him there. Although the Scriptures don’t comment, I wonder just how surprised and amazed Philip was at the warm reception he got there. He would not have been expecting to be well received in Samaritan land. But then, it was not about what Philip expected, it was all about Jesus.

It’s interesting to see what Philip says to the crowds who listen to him. And it is especially interesting to compare what he says here in Samaria, with what he says in the next story.

Because they are completely different.

Here in Samaria, Philip preaches two things (v12) – the good news of the Kingdom of God, and the name of Christ.

A few verses later, in verse 30 he simply asks a question of the Ethiopian, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Different place, different audience, different words.

We might guess that, in Samaria, Philip had a sort of plan about what he would say. Maybe, maybe not. But when we see Philip talking to the Ethiopian it’s absolutely clear he’s winging it.

Philip senses (in v26) that the Holy Spirit is calling him to go down the road to Gaza. He has no idea whom he is going to meet, or what is going to happen. It’s not about Philip’s plans or expectations, it’s all about Jesus.

He comes upon this Ethiopian. Now just to correct the record a bit here. This Ethiopia is not exactly the Ethiopia we know today. The area then known as Ethiopia was populated by the Nubian people, tall, thin, very dark-skinned. More like the Southern Sudanese of today. It was an area spread across the lower part of Egypt, Southern Sudan, Eritrea and northern Ethiopia.

He worked for the Candace. Candace is not a name, except for Candace Skillings, of course, – it’s a title used in Ethiopia for the Queen. So he didn’t work for Candace, he worked for THE Candace of Ethiopia. He was the Treasurer for the Candace. A kind of Peter Costello of Ethiopia. He had friends in high places. His brother probably ran World Vision Ethiopia.

Now I think we can safely say that Philip wasn’t planning to meet someone of such high rank and importance, nor had he worked out what he was going to say just in case he ran into the Federal Treasurer of a foreign country. But it didn’t matter. It wasn’t about Philip, it’s all about Jesus.

The Spirit tells Philip what to do. Who or what is this “spirit”? Well, it is none less than Jesus. When we say that the Holy Spirit is working today in the world, we mean Jesus. The very same Jesus whom Philip knew and preached.

So Philip discovers that the Ethiopian is reading Isaiah 53:7-8. “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, 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.”

How about that! The perfect verse for Philip to jump right in and swat this guy with the Good News. What a coincidence, eh? You couldn’t have planned it better if you’d tried!

Well, you didn’t need to plan it. This wasn’t about Philip’s plans at all. It was all about Jesus.

And then from verse 35 we read how Philip explained the good news of Jesus.

I love the way this is written in the Greek. The only translation that translates verse 35 literally is the old King James version. It reads “Then Philip opened his mouth...”

Now we know this is just a Greek way of saying he began to talk, but there is a nuance here that is sure to be intentional. When it is not about us, all we have to do is open our mouths. Jesus gives us the words.

So Philip opens his mouth and out tumbles the Good News about Jesus.

I reckon Philip is so in tune with Jesus at this point that he doesn't need to do anything. Jesus does it all. Philip does not have to have an altar call. Philip doesn't even say, “Well, what do you think about all this stuff I am saying?” He just speaks the words that seem right and the Ethiopian is convinced, convicted and converted.

It is the Ethiopian who sees the water. The Ethiopian asks to be baptised. The Ethiopian stops the chariot. It's not about Philip, it's about what Jesus is doing in the heart of the Ethiopian.

And just in case you are not sure that Philip is, by now, completely filled with the Holy Spirit; if you are not certain that Philip has surrendered his will completely to Jesus, we get further amazing evidence in v39. As soon as they come up out of the water, the Holy Spirit suddenly takes Philip away. Philip is on the Jesus jet to another place. If you've got to travel, this beats Qantas any time. OK Jesus, my work is done here, take me to the next place please. We're outta here!

Now there is a third story. Not as dramatic perhaps as these two. But it is about another Philip in the 20th century who woke up one morning in 1990 on a trip to Jerusalem expecting to have a pleasant half hour drive south and east towards Gaza. It was just going to be a short visit. World Vision had paid to have the kitchen of the Anglican hospital renovated and I just wanted to see what had been done. My brother-in-law, Graham Beeston, whom you met a couple of weeks ago, was with me. And our Jerusalem manager, Bill Warnock, was to be our driver and guide. That was my plan. But it wasn't about Philip's plans, it was all about Jesus.

Early in the morning an off-duty Israeli soldier had gone berserk and shot and killed Palestinian men and women waiting at a bus stop by the Gaza checkpoint. We heard this on the car radio as we motored down the bitumen towards the Mediterranean.

Near the Gaza checkpoint there was a long stream of vehicles. We drove straight up to the checkpoint. There was a police camera and what looked like a foreign TV news crew.

Bill said, 'Shalom'. The soldier spoke to him in Hebrew. Meanwhile a soldier asked me in English, 'Where are you going?' I said, 'Gaza'. Better to be obvious; I thought this was the only place you could go on this road. 'You cannot. Turn here.' Bill got the same message and he turned the car away, then slipped into a small car park right beside the checkpoint. 'Let's walk through', he said.

We walked briskly. Graham, looking like a rabbi, lagged a bit, and Bill hurried him along. 'Just keep walking. Don't look back.' Loudspeakers and loud-hailers sprang into noisy life. Nothing was said in any language I knew so we could not understand if they were asking us to stop (although we suspected that they were). I expected to hear the sound of army boots running up behind us; to feel a rough hand on the shoulder; or to hear a volley of warning shots. None of these happened. Once we were fifty metres away, it went quiet. Probably confusion about whether we were Israelis or foreigners, or whether we were heading for Gaza or the Israeli settlement that is just beside the checkpoint, illegally sited.

There's a service station 100 metres on the Gaza side of the checkpoint and Bill called the hospital where we were supposed to be going for a cup of tea and a guided tour. The news was bad. 'The whole of Gaza is in flames.' We could see columns of black smoke. One person was dead already in one refugee camp. There were reports that the Israelis were shooting at people from helicopters. It would be impossible to get in. It was the worst day in Gaza the hospital had ever seen. People were crazy. Soldiers were crazy. We should come only at our own risk. Regularly that day we prayed for angels to go before us and behind us. Bill said, 'We have to pray whether God wants us to go ahead or turn back.'

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (Acts 8:26)

Right then a Renault R4 with a UN flag flying pulled up. That was the fastest answer to prayer I ever had! I didn't even get to say 'Dear Heavenly Father'. I had a quick picture of God saying, 'I know, I know. Get on with it.' The UN official offered to take us into Gaza to the Hospital. We accepted.

Before we left, the man in the service station, who had offered us tea and cigarettes while we waited (we accepted tea), said, 'Look at these people [the Israelis]. We ask and ask and ask for talks, for peace. And this is what they do.'

The UN official said, 'Today, ten will be killed in Gaza, I predict.'

Along the way, blazing tyres littered the road. The driver described them as 'the Palestinian symbol of protest against the Israeli occupation'. Stones were everywhere. Gaza was like a war zone. Then I realised that was because it is a war zone. Houses and shops were boarded up. People huddled in doorways and up alleys. A couple of stones came our way, but mostly people waved and offered the V sign. We encountered two army jeeps. A group of young boys had scattered. The soldiers were running up an alley, crouched over, rifles pointing. We had to go another way. The driver ran the slalom of rocks and flames with skill and daring.

We arrived at the Anglican Hospital by 11.00 a.m. They had coped with the first wave of emergency cases. All medical staff had been found and brought to the hospital, mostly in ambulances. Non-urgent in-patients were sent home when the news of the first massacre was heard. The hospital administrator, Jorgen Rosendal, a Dane, knew there would be trouble.

There were reports that the army was using its stone throwing machine from helicopters. They also had a water cannon that fired hot and dyed water. It burned and marked its targets for

easier identification.

Now we heard that three dead had arrived at the nearby government hospital. There were over 100 casualties in camps, but no ambulances to bring them. Two quick Fiats arrived and people scattered. Two young men with head wounds were despatched into the emergency ward.

Throughout the day we heard the boom of tear gas cannon, the occasional burst of gun fire and the calls to mourning on the Muslim loudspeakers. As we walked to Jorgen's office we saw a soldier on a nearby roof-top watching us through binoculars. It felt eerie.

It looked like there would be five days of curfew, maybe ten. This idea of curfew was stupefying. An Israeli killed seven Arabs, and all the Arab towns were closed! Why did *they* get punished?

The phone rang, and as Jorgen spoke I wandered to the window and looked out. The birds still sang. A beautiful big jacaranda tree was in full bloom behind the hospital. It was going to look great, no matter what happened. I felt a sense of God's protection over all this sorrow.

Patients were now arriving in dribs and drabs. Two girls arrived without families. They had to be admitted as it was impossible to get them home. 'The hospital is also a hotel and a restaurant', joked one doctor.

Some children had been admitted. Mostly they had bullet wounds in the head. These were the so-called 'rubber' bullets: steel balls about the size of a marble covered with a thin layer of rubber. They had less give than a golf ball. Fired from a few metres they entered skulls and broke legs. In the hospital we saw the results on people and in their X-rays. Most of the older boys and young men seemed to have leg injuries caused by bullets. A surprising number were shot exactly in the knee.

Someone reported they heard an Israeli news bulletin that said there were only four gunshot wounds in Gaza. So far we had seen dozens and this was just one hospital among three major ones.

In the ward the wounded spoke to me. 'We want real peace -- for all. Jew, Muslim, Christian.' This was from a man who was shot in the hand two days before and now had returned with a leg wound. 'Look and compare our situation with the rest of the world. Other people are protected; we are shot at. Boys this age should be in school; here they are in hospital. We should feel cared for and protected.'

Reports came in that the soldiers were using live ammunition in Rafah camp. They were insisting that the people go to their houses rather than the army withdrawing. It was a stand-off.

Now we heard the official figures to about 4.00 p.m. One hundred and sixty-seven casualties treated at the government hospital, and 107 at the Anglican one. We heard unofficial reports that nine were dead in Gaza and four in the West Bank. That was the worst day ever.

After five hours we left in a UN car. The army stopped us three times. The first time two jeeps wedged us between them. There were no people in sight, but rocks immediately started to hail down. Bill said, 'Drive, drive'. The calm German woman giving us a lift waited to hear the advice from the soldier, so she could ignore it and tell the driver to continue. The soldier said, 'You cannot go down that road. It is too dangerous.' As we drove away the woman said, 'Only dangerous for the army'.

A large group of young men was positioned fifty metres away, hidden from the army vehicles by a two-storey building. They continued to throw stones in long arcs over the building at their out-of-sight targets. Impressively, they landed with pin-point accuracy. The boys paused as they saw us, then waved us on. Only dangerous for the army.

At the second army patrol a Major asked brusquely for our German hostess's ID card. He read it and said, 'Go ahead', adding 'Welcome' as if he had learned it was good to be polite to aid agency people.

A third checkpoint let us through without delay. We were sure glad that God sent the well-marked UN cars to help us out twice in one day.

At the final checkpoint, where our car was parked, the UN driver could not go on because she did not have a 'metallic card' which permitted exit from Gaza. Bill suggested we walk through. Was he pressing our luck? The German woman said she would wait to see how we got on and come up if there was any trouble.

Bill said, 'Walk briskly. Look like you know what you're doing. Don't make eye contact with anyone.' We passed by without incident and drove away. Bill later said that the hardest thing he had to do all day was to get two Australians to walk like they knew what they were doing.

We had spent the day in Gaza. It was a day never to be forgotten, and an experience that had cut into our hearts and our minds. As the cut healed it would leave deep scars.

More than any other day in my 24 years with World Vision, this day is fixed in my memory. It was not a day I planned. I had gone to see how money was being spent, I learned how injustice was being delivered. I had planned to look at a kitchen, I met men and women and children, the victims of a stupid conflict. I had planned one thing, something else happened. You see, it wasn't about Philip, it was all about Jesus.