

PASSION FOR THE HARVEST

Harvest Sunday 2018

Acts 4:5-12

Dad had served 20 years with the NZARMY and wanted to pursue his dream of owning a deer farm. So, in 1990 my parents brought a 60-acre farm under Rainbow Mountain in the Bay of Plenty. We had 50 deer, 100 sheep, 2 pigs, 8 bantams, 4 apple trees, a huge vegetable garden, and mum planted hundreds of daffodil bulbs in the front paddock. As a new farming family, we soon developed a passion for the harvest.

Harvesting on our farm came in many forms. We harvested potatoes and corn from our garden. Apples from the trees. Every year we harvested the velvet antler growth from the bucks. Fawns and lambs were born, fattened up, and sent to the market. Sheep were shorn, the wool bailed-up and sold. The bantams laid eggs every day and we took turns to collect them. The pigs were fattened up and eventually found their new home in our freezer. We cut bunches and bunches of daffodils every year. My three other siblings and I were involved in it all. As a family we had passion for the harvest.

Philip, whom we hear about in our reading from Acts this morning, he also had passion for the harvest, but only of a different kind. He had a passion not for the harvest of farm produce - Philip had passion for the harvest of souls – his passion was to see that all people might encounter Jesus and come to know him.

In the opening chapter of the book of Acts Jesus tells his friends that they will be the ones to continue his work of spreading the gospel “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The whole globe was their farm if you like, and Jesus, the Shepherd. It was under the leadership of Philip, directed by the angel of the Lord, that the good news was taken to Africa.

On this occasion the angel of the Lord told Philip to travel a certain way, to take the “wilderness road”. Philip surrenders control of his travel plans and goes where the angel of the Lord tells him. Along this road the Spirit says to Philip to approach and join an Ethiopian riding in a chariot. Philip runs over to him and as he approaches the chariot he overhears the African reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah. Philip asks him if he understands the meaning of the

text and the man invites Philip onboard his chariot for a conversation about it. Philip accepts the chance to share the good news of Jesus.

Like those first friends of Jesus, we, the Parish of St. Peters, likewise, have heard and accepted the mission of Jesus to be his witnesses in the world and to tell of the good news. To be preachers and prayers of God's kingdom come. To share Jesus. To be passionate for the harvest that strives to see all encounter Jesus and come to know him.

We have heard this sort of talk before, one place it can be found is in our Liturgy of Baptism and Confirmation. When we were baptised, we were brought to Jesus. Our being baptised was a new start to life in which we were accepted and sealed by God with the Holy Spirit to represent Christ to the world. When we were baptised, either we ourselves or someone on our behalf, declared "in faith I turn to Christ, my way, my truth, my life" and in the waters of re-birth we were renewed by the Spirit and raised to new life. We were marked with the cross, the sign of Christ. It remains on our foreheads to this very day. In our baptism we were each made a disciple of Christ. When we came for confirmation we affirmed or re-affirmed before God, the bishop, and our community, our faith. Hands were laid upon us with prayer that we might be strengthened by God for the work of God's kingdom.

If you are baptised, this is your identity, my identity, our identity. Have there ever been more-an-important word spoken upon, and within, your life than at your baptism?

If we are 70 individuals gathered this morning who have given our lives to Jesus in baptism, become his friends and disciples, and live and work as kingdom people - how are we doing? How are we doing joining in the work of God to bring redemption into this world, into our community, into our own lives?

This sounds quite evangelistic doesn't it. Evangelism being the setting forth of the good news of Jesus so that all can hear and respond, as Philip was doing. What is our understanding of the ministry of evangelism here at St. Peters? Do we have such a ministry? If not, should there be one? What would it look like?

I did an assignment years ago that explored the place of evangelism in the mission of the Church. I called the assignment 'The E-Word' and described evangelism as "a very hungry word, having an unquenchable appetite for the salvation of all people in our world." I wrote of how many Christian churches

seem to avoid the word for fear it might consume all tradition, reason, relationship, dignity and security. It is a word that carries much baggage and has seen its share of struggle. It has been mis-understood and mis-used. It is a word in need of its own 'new life'. It is untameable. I like that about it. And adventurous. It is a hungry word - for it carries the ravenous appetite of the gospel within it, and It is a word that must be redeemed from its prison of socially unacceptable words, to give the Anglican Church the edge it needs in continuing its life and mission. Whatever the word does or does not do for us doesn't change the fact that we need it. Is it not at the heart of our Christian calling to set forth the good news of Jesus?

Philip set for the good news of Jesus to the man from Ethiopia. This man-evangelised encountered Jesus in and through the words of Isaiah, coupled with the insight of Philip, and in his very own searching.

Life wasn't easy for a eunuch in ancient times. They were stereotyped as sexually immoral, seen as broken men unable to be fruitful. We hear the Ethiopian man had come to Jerusalem to worship, but the old Laws prohibited eunuch's to enter the assembly of the Lord.

But the Ethiopian is not reading from Deuteronomy; he is reading Isaiah, a book of hope and inclusion for eunuchs, prisoners, the poor, the sick, the lame, and the outcast. Isaiah 56:4-5 speaks of a time of blessing when eunuch's and other outcast persons are free to fully participate in the assembly.

For a follower of Jesus like Philip he would have sensed a strong connection between the Ethiopian reading from Isaiah about the "sheep led to the slaughter" and Jesus' own teaching from the book of Isaiah. He may have sensed too this man's own identification with whom Isaiah was writing, for he too would have known full well about "humiliation" and "justice denied". We and Philip know not only does God know and understand the eunuch's experience; Jesus himself took on that lowly and outcast state.

Philip shared Jesus. The Ethiopian man felt so touched by the encounter, that as soon as he caught a glimpse of water, he announced "Look! what is to prevent me from being baptised?" Nothing. There was nothing now at all in the way of he and Jesus. Together they went down into the water, and Philip baptised him then the there.

There is something in all of this that speaks to the core of our identity as the Body of Christ in the world right here right now.

This Harvest Sunday I hope each of us will re-member once more to whom we belong. We will remember our baptism. Who we are as Christ's Church in this community. The commission of Jesus to us to share the good news. To share Jesus so that people may encounter him. That we will give evangelism a place and make this a priority giving of our resources for the benefit of peoples who not yet know Jesus. To have passion for the harvest as a people who rejoice in our faith.