

**NAURC worship**  
**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021**  
**including Holy Communion**

Led by Revd John Potter (*live on Zoom from Ipswich Rd URC*)

**Welcome and lighting of the candle for hope and peace**

**Call to worship:** Isaiah 56: 1&2 (Contemporary English Version)

The Lord said:

    Be honest and fair!  
Soon I will come to save you;  
my saving power will be seen  
    everywhere on earth.  
I will bless everyone  
who respects the Sabbath  
    and refuses to do wrong.

**Worship songs:** The Spirit lives to set us free (MP 664, Petts Wood video)

For I'm building a people of power (MP 151, Petts Wood video)

**Opening prayers** (Word in the World and Roots 06, adapted)

God of all life, of all ages, of all places;  
God of all people, of all voices, of all accents;  
God of all humanity, of our variety and blends of faith;

When creation came to be, you held its hand;  
when the earth was first flooded with light, it was you who shielded its eyes.  
You are the persisting presence, always, ever alert.  
As old or as ancient as you are, we also know you as the very new within us - as the  
exciting, the emerging, the ever-new, whatever our age.  
God of all life, as we worship you this day, encircle us with the support of your  
strength; embrace us with the renewal of your mercy, that within your love we might  
be touched by the wisdom of the ages and be beckoned by the spirit of tomorrow.

Within your enfolding we know you as the life-giver, the befriender, the travelling  
companion, the mysterious stranger,  
the fleeting memory, the helper and keeper of us all.  
In you we place our trust and open our secret places;  
In you we dare the openness to worship;  
In you, past and future join hands in adoration.

Loving God, amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life, we scarcely find time to seek your face.

We fill our time with so many of our own activities that we sometimes miss your opportunities.

We have so much to say that we sometimes fail to hear your whisper.

We have so much to do that we sometimes fail to see you working in and through others.

In our busyness, we seek forgiveness and pray for perception to discern the opportunities to share with others.

In our hesitations we seek forgiveness and pray for the wisdom to understand your call upon our life.

In our relationships forgive our hesitations and ask for the courage to walk with strangers. Amen.

### **Bible readings: ( Read by Kirsty)**

#### **Isaiah 56: 1-7 (NRSVA version)**

Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.

<sup>2</sup> Happy is the mortal who does this,  
the one who holds it fast,  
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,  
and refrains from doing any evil.

<sup>3</sup> Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,  
'The LORD will surely separate me from his people';  
and do not let the eunuch say,  
'I am just a dry tree.'

<sup>4</sup> For thus says the LORD:  
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup> I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.

<sup>6</sup> And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my covenant—

<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;

their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.

### **Acts 8: 26-40**

<sup>26</sup> Then the angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, Arise and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, which is in the desert. <sup>27</sup> And Philip arose and went on. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, who was a chamberlain, and of great authority with Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, and in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to pray. <sup>28</sup> And as he returned home again sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.

<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, Go near and overtake that chariot. <sup>30</sup> And Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, Do you understand what you are reading? <sup>31</sup> And he said, How can I, unless I have a guide? And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> The tenor of the scripture that he was reading was this: He was led as a sheep to be slain, and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so he opened not his mouth. <sup>33</sup> Because of his humbleness, he was not esteemed. But who can number his descendants? For his life is taken from the earth.

<sup>34</sup> The chamberlain said to Philip, I ask you, of whom does the prophet speak this? of himself, or of some other man? <sup>35</sup> And Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture, and preached Jesus to him.

<sup>36</sup> And as they went on their way, they came to some water, and the chamberlain said, See, here is water. What is to keep me from being baptized? <sup>37</sup> Philip said to him, If you believe with all your heart, you may be. He answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

<sup>38</sup> And he commanded the chariot to stand still. And they both went down into the water, both Philip and also the chamberlain, and he baptized him.

<sup>39</sup> And as soon as they had come out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, and the chamberlain saw him no more. And he went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip was found at Azotus, and he walked throughout the country preaching in their towns till he came to Caesarea.

### **Sermon: A cast of unlikely characters**

Isaiah 56: 1-7 & Acts 8: 26-40

> There are times when the suggested readings for Sundays that I like to follow jump around a bit, and this week is just such an occasion.

> This week I have selected the main reading from the book of Acts, but the passage is set *after* Pentecost – which we don't celebrate for a few weeks yet. Anyway,

please bear with me for the lack of logical chronology as we set off to explore the expansion of the Good News of the Gospel in the light of the resurrection of Jesus.

> This particular story began in a community meeting – you see Church Meetings go back a long way!

> In Acts chapter six, there is a record of the company of believers being called together to discuss some complaints that have arisen. It has to do with the distribution of food. The solution was to set aside a group of seven people to handle this task so that the disciples could devote themselves to “to prayer and to serving the word.”

> Dare I say we haven’t looked back since in forming committees?!

> Anyway, two of the people chosen for their qualities of being of “good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” were Stephen and Philip.

> Stephen’s story is one of remarkably brave and inspired preaching that, sadly, resulted in him being the first Christian martyr. The consequences of his death led to a severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem and Philip was among those who had to flee as a result.

> He headed north to Samaria and began very successfully sharing the Gospel with the people there – it’s worth recalling at this point, that when Jesus commissioned the disciples to carry on His ministry he said; “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

> Let’s just pause for a moment – it was the disciples that Jesus had commissioned for this task. Philip had been tasked with organising food distribution, or some other texts say the task was to deal with the church finances.

> In Philip we see the first of our unlikely characters.

> He wasn’t among the initial group of disciples of Jesus tasked with sharing the Gospel, but quite clearly the Holy Spirit enabled him to do a great deal more than ‘serve at tables’ as some translations put it. Stephen was also a gifted preacher. This group of people show how the Gospel was not to be contained within what looks like a chosen few – it also shows clearly that the gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable the sharing of the Good News of Jesus cannot be contained within just the people set aside in the role of minister.

> At this point I also want to briefly mention another of this group of ‘table servers’ another of our unlikely characters – Nicolaus who was a convert from Antioch which was a long way north in Syria.

> So, Philip, who wasn’t amongst the ‘official’ disciples, who had been chosen to a specific task of sorting out the food distribution problem, was now in Samaria (North of Jerusalem) telling crowds of people about Jesus and performing signs such as driving out demons (Acts 8: 5-8).

> The disciples hear of what Philip is achieving and go to join him, but there is more to come.

> We are told that an angel appears to Philip who tells him to move on once again, and head a long way south, past Jerusalem, and set off on the wilderness road to Gaza.

> Whilst on his travels along comes a chariot and Philip is told by the Holy Spirit that its rather grand looking occupant is the person he had been sent to meet.  
> Frustratingly we don't get to find out his name, but this is the next of our cast of unlikely characters.

> Luke (who wrote Acts) tells us of four important facts about the passenger in the chariot. He was a man of wealth in influence, witnessed by the fact he was being chauffeured in a chariot:

1. He was a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.
2. He was an Ethiopian – from a very different country and he would have looked different to, in all probability he was black.
3. But he was heading back home after visiting Jerusalem to worship – so maybe Jewish? This is all the more likely as he was reading the scroll of Isaiah on the journey.
4. He was a eunuch – so very different from the average man you might meet in your travels.

> All of these items of information mark him out as an unlikely character for Philip to be sent to meet – and yet these are the two people God set up an encounter with.

> The meeting took place a long way from Jerusalem where the church had started to grow and I think it significant that it was Philip whose task had not originally been that of an apostle who was sent to talk with this man from a completely different country.

> Philip had started to share the Gospel in Samaria as Jesus had asked the disciples to do, and now, began the further spread of the Good News of Jesus even further – a spread that was to reach to the ends of the earth in accordance with the request of Jesus.

> In another interesting cultural twist Luke tells us that the Eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship – but in Jewish tradition he would only have been allowed to do so in a limited capacity as the laws forbade the full participation of anyone like him who were considered deformed. (see Leviticus 21:20 & Deuteronomy 23).

> None the less this 'outsider' still made the journey and was now reading the scriptures.

> What happened next has echoes of another of Luke's stories, the Emmaus Road that Ian reflected on a couple of weeks ago.

> Philip approached the chariot and asked the official if he understood what he was reading. Then followed a conversation as the eunuch asked Philip for an explanation. The passage was part of one of the suffering servant songs in Isaiah that reminds us so clearly of Jesus. And Philip continued to explain all about Jesus.

> What happens next is remarkable.

> As they continued along the road, they come across maybe a pool or a stream and the eunuch exclaims:

'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?'

- > What didn't happen was Philip saying, well I'd better speak to my superiors about it. He didn't say, 'there's no way that's going to happen to a eunuch'. He didn't say, 'you'll have to attend a series of talks and pass the scripture exam first'.
- > All that mattered was the faith of that black foreigner and that was enough – and Philip baptised him there and then.
- > In welcoming the un-named foreign eunuch into God's household another prophecy from Isaiah was fulfilled – the passage that Kirsty read for us earlier.
- > I'll remind you of what it was; (IS 56: 3-5)

“Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
 ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;  
 and do not let the eunuch say,  
 ‘I am just a dry tree.’

<sup>4</sup> For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
 who choose the things that please me  
 and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup> I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
 a monument and a name”

> We are told that Philip is miraculously relocated to a town near the coast, and we don't hear of the official again – but he must have shared what he had discovered in this encounter as the Ethiopian church is one of the oldest and it still thrives to this day.

> The Gospel was on the move into Africa.

> In fact, it's interesting to note that the Gospel was shared in Africa long before it ever reached Britain. Ethiopia has a much longer Christian heritage than we do!

> There are several themes from this story that you have probably picked up on already, but I'm going to mention anyway as I conclude.

> The first is to note that God enables a whole range of people through the power of the Holy Spirit to share the Good News of Jesus.

> It isn't just those that are elected into the official role of minister or evangelist that God works with. In fact, there is far more to do in the service of Jesus than just one small group of individuals can ever manage. Everyone has a role to play and they can be given opportunity and the words to share the love of God in Jesus Christ.

> Second, ours is a faith that is alive and dynamic – it won't stay still. God is always at least one step ahead of us – beckoning us onward to new encounters with new people, even in ways and places that we never imagined possible.

> As a consequence, we can learn from Philip to be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and take those brave steps into unfamiliar territory, to meet people on the outside of our familiar boundaries.

> Third is to take note of what Luke tells us of this Ethiopian court official.

- > To begin with: black lives matter. Please remember that neither Jesus, not the disciples, nor Philip, nor the court official were pale Europeans.
- > Second he, and Philip, were unlikely candidates to be key to the spread of the Gospel. As a commentary puts it, they were the ‘wrong people’. Philip was supposed to serve food while the disciples got on the sharing the word. The Ethiopian was foreign, and also explicitly prohibited from full inclusion according to scripture.
- > This leads me to the third point. It’s quite clear in the Old Testament laws that eunuchs are barred, it’s there in two different places. And yet an angel no less, directed by God, seeks out Philip to go and meet him.
- > I am reminded of what Robert spoke to us about in last week’s sermon – of the great shepherd seeking those outside the fold and this is yet another example.
- > The eunuch in this piece of our faith history is just such a person.
- > The letter of the law says they are excluded, but God knows otherwise. I found a clever cartoon that illustrates what I mean – it shows Jesus having a word with some academic or clerical types and the speak bubble reads; “The difference between me and you is you use scripture to determine what love means and I use love to determine what scripture means.”
- > The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch has a lot to teach us about being open, brave enough to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit and to learn that for God the law of love and faithfulness comes before all else, even what look like fixed rules in ancient texts, and that has a huge influence on our welcome and our conversations.

Amen

**Hymn:** Go forth and tell (R&S 574, Newcastle video)

**Prayers of concern and the Lord’s prayer**

**Song:** Jesus you call us (Resound Worship)

**Holy Communion**

**Hymn:** Let us talents and tongues employ

(R&S 453, video from internet used with permission Unity Lutheran Church, Brookland)

**The blessing**