Area Council Service 260412

The Ethiopian Eunuch

One of the words which I have taken from the next generation and much enjoy is ‘random’. As in this example. I spent Monday at Scottish TV with a group of inter-faith leaders. They were trying to persuade us of the value of social media and networking. In self-defence, I remarked abstractly that, while I was a bit unsure about Facebook myself, my cat did have a Facebook profile. Immediately – as in the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch – the media person said that she would love to be a friend of my cat on Facebook. And when I told my daughter, who is the cat’s social and media secretary, she said, ‘That’s fine. I’m used to dealing with randoms’

Philip was dealing with a random. But we might say that nothing is random with God. Who knows what Philip was thinking about. But he almost certainly was not thinking about baptising Ethiopian eunuchs. And an Ethiopian eunuch was probably the last person whom he might have expected to baptise. So as I think we all do in ministry – he found himself almost in the middle of something without being at all sure how he got there. An apparently chance meeting. An opportunity to explain the scripture – we might say an opportunity for Holy Conversation, the kind of conversation with a complete stranger which contains a sufficiency of trust as to enable it to touch on deep things. The challenge to act in a way which seals that with sacramental action which changes everything.

I’m going to risk saying that I think I know what that might mean in the context of the kind of ministry in which we are involved in our churches. Let me explain.

As you know, I think that we have to think strategically. Like the early church, we need to have a burning sense of purpose and direction. We also need to know about tactics – about what to do and when. But lest that should become a rigid thing though which we pursue God’s mission as we design, there also needs to be a random and even opportunistic – maybe even entrepreneurial – element to it. But lest that should become completely laissez-faire to the point of chaotic, we have to have an eye to the institutional framework within which we work. And it’s that third element which is the most difficult – because random and institution don’t go together and, to be honest, spirit and institution don’t fit well either. If you read Richard Holloway’s book, you’ll find that it is in that tension that many of his difficulties lie.

There is one other fascinating element to this story – which I expect is true to your experience as it is to mine.

Philip found himself in a random situation with a random person – and he found that the whole situation was moving faster than he expected and in a way for which he wasn’t prepared. Hence the question, ‘What is to prevent me from being baptised?’ But think about it – and set that experience over against what is our more common experience – which is that we and what we represent are greeted with a benign tolerance which shades over into indifference; we are quite unable to see and certainly not to stir any of the kind of immediacy and connection which there was in the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. And we haven’t got the faintest idea why.

Jesus is the bread of life – why will people not eat? And the reflective answer of humity to that question is surely, ‘Why are we ourselves reluctant to eat?’

The answer it seems to me – and here I am really talking to myself – is that it is the focus on our own needs which inhibits us from being drawn towards the Father. While the Bread from Heaven will give life to the world, we have to be prepared – to borrow the colloquial phrase – we have to be prepared to be dying for it. Or to say it in another way, it is about transcending ourselves. And if all we do is to focus in prayer on our own needs, there will be no space in which to hear ourselves being drawn by the Father.

The Ethiopian Eunuch – as we might say – simply ‘went for it’ and Philip found himself going with that. We need to learn from that about immediacy and depth of response – about obedience – and about God’s presence and power in the apparently random.