**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

That story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch really is one of the oddest stories. It reads a bit like an Aesop’s fable - a weird mix of ordinary and extraordinary. I saw it somewhere described as the Hitch-hiker’s Guide to the Bible - reference I suppose to Philip being picked up by a passing chariot, having a good old natter about life, the universe and everything on the journey, and then being dropped off at the next watering hole! Or planet or something.

But actually, there’s a bit more to it than that....

It is slightly out of place here, in the sense that the story takes place after Jesus’ Ascension into heaven, and after the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost, neither of which we have yet had in our own calendar –Ascension forty days after Easter, this year on May 10th, and Pentecost ten days after that.

Philip and six others have been charged by the church community to serve on their behalf, and they are working hard, along with the apostles, proclaiming the Good News, healing the sick and consequently getting into all sorts of trouble with the authorities, as more and more people are turning to this new Christian religion and being baptised. They are exciting times.

And in this story, we see Philip learning how to be a follower of Jesus in a time when Jesus is no longer physically around. We see him responding to some inner sense of calling – and we see a non-Christian being helped to respond to God’s call to him through Philip.

So, how can we know what God wants us to do? It’s a question that every Christian and every Christian community needs to ask. And this reading from Acts gives us some insights into the possible answer.

First of all, Philip is attentive to God and expects to hear Him and be guided by Him. At the point where we pick up the story, Philip has been in Samaria, preaching. There’s a bit that says an angel of the Lord told Philip to go south to the Jerusalem/Gaza road. And then a bit further on, we are told that the Spirit tells Philip to go over to the chariot. Luke seems to be saying that Philip is hearing a voice that gives him instructions about what to do next. Whether it is a physical voice, I couldn’t say, but Philip certainly has some sort of inner nudging, and he is brave enough to follow that instinct. So up he gets and off he goes to the chariot.

Clearly, not every inner prompting we might experience is the work of the Holy Spirit. A lot of the things we decide to do are based on plain old common sense. And inner promptings can be strange things. But they can lead to encounters that in retrospect do seem to be Holy Spirit-led.

We have to remember that Philip is living in close relationship with God and has begun to recognise that God is there in those inner promptings. He’s begun to recognise that God can work through the most unlikely situations and so he is willing to listen for that voice and to expect that he will be guided by God.

Secondly, Philip is quite brave – and prepared to take risks – in his obedience to God’s call. Being told to ‘go south’, alone, on a wilderness road is not really terribly sensible – we hear elsewhere about bandits and wild animals and so on, that make those roads dangerous places to be by yourself. But in doing it anyway, Philip finds himself right where he can be most effectively used by God.

Worse, if you picture the scene, the Ethiopian, a powerful foreign senior politician, is looking out of the chariot window and sees this weirdo working class bloke sidling up to his chariot and daring to suggest that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about in the scripture he’s reading. Yet, through this weirdo, the eunuch becomes a follower of Jesus.

So, Philip is attentive, expectant, courageous and obedient: all adjectives that describe how best we all, as individuals and as a community, could respond to God.

If Philip hadn’t done as he did, the Ethiopian might not have found faith in Christ – and the wider implication would be that the early Christian church in Africa might not have been founded until much much later.

If Philip hadn’t been all those things, the Ethiopian might have continued to misinterpret scripture and his faith could have ground to a halt altogether.

And everywhere we go there is a traveller who needs our wisdom, our bravery and our sense of mission – not our own mission, but God’s mission. If we do not respond to the call, then we deny the mission. The task begun by Jesus through the apostles continues and we are all called to be part of it.

I had a conversation recently with a Christian who clearly believed that the world was created in six days and that evolution is an evil construct developed by godless scientists. There was a point at which I could bottle out, nod politely and let it go; I am not someone who wades into conflict comfortably. But my own theology is clear that those things are not mutually exclusive, and the sense became so strong that I had to say something. It was as though God was daring me to speak.

There are people out there who need us, in our various ways, to be ‘Philip’ to them. If, as Christian disciples, we do not respond to God’s calling, then we impoverish God’s mission in the world. The missionary task started by Jesus sending out the apostles, continues, and you and I are called by God to be part of it.

So let us pray this week for grace to be attentive to God’s call; wisdom to notice the movement of the Holy Spirit within us; courage to respond to it and obedience to follow where it leads.

**Amen**