

Acts 8: 26-40

John 15:1-8

Acts 8 v31 "How can I," he said, "Unless someone explains it to me?" So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

We are a congregation, and as such, we have much in common, but we are all different. For instance, we don't all buy the same newspaper; watch the same things on TV or all like the same food. As a congregation, you have a lot in common.

There have been blessings and challenges in the history of this congregation and no doubt you will face more in times to come.

These are shared experiences. Though, they will have affected us all in different ways, because we are all different and have had different life experiences.

Take today. There will be some of us watching or listening, who have had happy life experiences in the recent past. There may be someone whose heart is breaking.

Someone who has had bad news from the doctor about themselves or a loved one.

There may be someone right now, who is seeking the truth with all their heart and just not seeming to get answers.

So, you see, not everyone will be feeling on top of the world. Not everyone will be a confident believer.

Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch is a reminder that many people on the fringe of church life are simply curious. They would like to know more. Some of them, like the Ethiopian eunuch, are rich sophisticated, intelligent and deeply thoughtful. Any aggressive arm-twisting tactics will be resisted.

But if like Philip, an encounter is made with courteous sensitivity, not judgmental or intrusive, then communication can take place.

One of the acid tests of any sermon is: "Has it made people think more deeply about the things that matter?" or has it simply tickled the ears of the listener. It could be argued that the principal task of Christian communication today is apologetics: in other words, to present the faith that it is perceived to be reasonable and a serious possibility for anyone who wants to go further. The task is to offer clues or tempting tasters to encourage a person to explore further.

In one of the well-known hymns, there's a line that goes, "Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in."

Now if that's the case, and here's an interesting argument, then curiosity and doubt are vital stepping-stones to faith. They, especially doubt, is often seen as something negative in the church. There is a perception that to question something, or to have a doubt about a matter of faith is somehow a failing, making you a second-class

citizen. It seems to say that to use the intellect God gave us, and if that intellect comes up with a question or leads us to a doubt about something, then it is somehow a failing on our part.

My own feeling on the matter is more in line with the view that each doubt and question can help in the journey of faith. You know, Lord Soper the famous preacher of last century, used to describe the church as “A fellowship of Doubt.”

A former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Professor Davidson wrote a book called, “The Courage to doubt.”

So then, curiosity is a genetic fact of life. We’re born with it. Just look at any baby or toddler. They’re into everything. Even though our boys are now adults, it doesn’t seem all that long ago our house had child proof locks on everything, and the car had the same.

With children, you need to have eyes in the back of your head to watch them! But it is through exploration that they learn. But the process is not meant to stop with age. There doesn’t come a point when we say, “Ok that’s it, I’ve got enough now, I know it all.”

You see, once curiosity dries up, the motivation to learn dies. And that means intellectual death. I was brought up in an age when children were not supposed to question things too much. They were taught to answer, not to answer back. The adage that children were seen and not heard still had a residual effect on things, though it was changing in my school days.

It may have ensured a bit of peace and quiet at the time, but I wonder, how many questions went unanswered? How many were kept in the dark? It’s different these days, where kids are encouraged to question and ask if they don’t understand something. Sometimes it can seem as if we’ve gone too far the other way and respect for the teacher and adults can seem to be eroded. It can be very challenging at times, especially to those who were brought up in that stricter era.

Curiosity is God’s way of keeping us on our toes.

For the journey of faith does not lead to a cul-de-sac – a place where you arrive, but from which you’re not going anywhere. Oh no. It’s a journey of discovery, where every day new lessons are to be learned and surprises are in store. The journey of faith is an adventure. Samuel Rutherford once said: “I shall go in at heaven’s gate with my book in my hand still learning.”

On our journey of faith, there will be many blessings and there will be times that we will find trying. One thing is for sure, God will be with you, to strengthen, help, and guide you.

Many round-about us have experienced similar challenges and been there before you; so, don’t be afraid to ask someone for advice when you need it. After all, they

may well come to you for your advice on a matter. We all bring our own skills and talents when we serve the Lord.

For many of us, doubt is a staging post along the road of faith. I would suggest that it's emotionally and intellectually dishonest to imagine that doubt can be ignored, repressed, or ditched like some old baggage. If so, it will invariably return to haunt us.

There's an adage that goes: "Faith is always faith, in the teeth of doubt." "Through many a conflict, many a doubt, we come."

Philip had a respect for where the Ethiopian eunuch was coming from.

He dealt with the man patiently, addressing the questions and uncertainties, recognizing that if faith is to matter, it has to be made my, or the enquirer's own truth.

This side of heaven, we do not have all the answers. We do not see all things, but we see through a glass darkly.

We are not finished articles, all sorted and perfect. Quite the reverse.

We come as we are, with our questions and doubts, trusting that we will eventually come to an understanding or place of faith, when we can say, I don't understand, but I do trust in you Lord. We may get the answers we seek soon, or it may take some of us a lifetime of struggle.

None of us are perfect, yet our Lord wants to have fellowship with us. That is a thought worthy of contemplation.

"Through many a conflict, many a doubt, we come."

Amen.