

Hello everyone

We are often told to look out for opportunities, aren't we?

Don't let good opportunities pass you by.

And through my life so far I've had many great opportunities to grab hold of.

Whether that was in education, jobs, houses, friends and churches.

I am still on the lookout for good opportunities even if it just buying cream cakes when they are reduced to 5p in Morrisons.

The strange thing is that I don't really like cream cakes. Still 5p!

It's too good an opportunity to pass up isn't it? Actually, I think it's something about being in ministry. I remember a minister in one place I lived when I was younger who you often met in the co op on a Friday evening at 6pm because that was when he could fill his basket at vastly reduced prices.

Grab your opportunities it's part of life but do it in such a way that you don't hurt others.

Jesus asks his followers to do that. Luke tells us they are to spread the good news in Jerusalem and out through Judea and Samaria to the ends of earth. It's a vague

instruction really isn't it? Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria we understand but what is meant by the ends of the Earth? It may well be everywhere, but then maybe Jesus had a place in mind. Ancient mythological geography knew the location of the end of the Earth and that was Ethiopia. Read the first few lines of The Odyssey, the epic poem by Homer and we read of Poseidon, who is one of the most bad tempered, vengeful, moody and greedy of the Greek Gods. He was God of the sea and he's on his travels to collect an offering when Homer tells us:

Now Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians worlds away. Ethiopians off at the ends of the earth.

Odyssey is not just a great tale it is a familiar word in English too, isn't it? We use it to mean a series of adventurous journeys through which changes of fortune ripple.

But that is just what Jesus asks his followers to do. He sets them off on a series of adventurous journeys; an Odyssey to spread the good news from Jerusalem to the end of the earth via Samaria and Judea.

And on that journey, his followers certainly experience changes in fortunes don't they?

Many react positively to the message, but the followers sometimes are in jail. Luckily supportive Pharisees like Gamaliel help out and angels are on hand to unlock gates and so the message spreads.

But one of their number, Stephen, is killed and the followers, except the disciples, are scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Just the places Luke tells us that Jesus wants his followers to go to.

Philip is one of this group of believers, his odyssey takes him to proclaim the Messiah in Samaria. He is very successful. Peter and John come to check up, then, an angel tells him to move southward to a wilderness road where he meets an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in his chariot. This is not entry level chariot this is the top of the range transport for the treasurer to the queen of the Ethiopians. The ends of the earth are within the followers grasp it seems. He is sitting in his chariot in the first century equivalent of a layby reading out loud from the book of Isaiah.

And you can imagine Philip thinking well what an opportunity this is to spread the message of the messiah.

I can't miss this chance to work with God.

And maybe we pause a moment and think. Just when was the last time we met someone like that, someone just waiting to talk about God?

Philip approaches the Ethiopian eunuch who is miles from home and starts to talk to him.

As you read the story you get the impression that the Ethiopian had not found what he was looking for in Jerusalem. So, he sits in his chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah. Never one to miss an opportunity to work for the Lord, Philip asks him 'do you understand what you are reading. The passage includes

he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

How can I unless someone guides me? the Eunuch answers

Who is the author talking about?

Is it himself or is it about someone else?

This is not a simple question for Philip to answer and still today this is not a simple question for us to answer. Of course, Phillip has to start by saying Isaiah is actually talking about Israel. The prophet has been painting a

picture of the destiny of the suffering servant. This is about the true Israel, those who are faithful to Torah and the suffering comes from all they have had to suffer in the Bible story so far.

But it's a bit of a puzzle. Sometimes the suffering servant is talked of as an individual, maybe King Hezekiah, but at other times, it's a group of people, hence Israel.

But Philip like the other earlier followers of Jesus seized the opportunity to borrow this extract and add that, we, the fledgling church, see her Lord in the suffering of Jesus, the lamb of God who let himself be slaughtered. This is what leapt out at the Ethiopian when Phillip grabbed his opportunity to spread the good news. But the good news Philip spreads is not just about Jesus being Lord. Luke always emphasises that we worship God the father and Jesus his son who also asks us to care for others.

Maybe The eunuch sees an echo of his suffering in this story of a suffering servant. He has found God, but he has also found Jesus and he's found himself too. This is something to celebrate. It seems the eunuch doesn't like to miss an opportunity either. Look here's water he says. I can be baptised. So Philip baptises him.

When they come out of the water, Philip is whisked away by the spirit to another opportunity at Azotus. He continues his adventurous journey preaching the good news until he reaches Caesarea where later Paul visits him and his four unmarried daughters all who have the gift of prophecy.

The eunuch went on his eventful journey too worshipping God with a new life.

God.

Each of us is on an eventful journey with God. Each of us is sometimes like the eunuch- a little confused and in need of help to understand things.

But we can be a bit shy at asking for help.

We shouldn't be because like Phillip, there are church people happy to grasp opportunities to help out.

In fact, God expects all of us to do just that.

Spread the good news.

Journeying with the church can be an eventful journey full of changes of fortune.

Maybe Poseidon doesn't cause us to be shipwrecked and we don't get to go to the ends of the earth, but each day we do get to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the suffering servant, helping out where we can.

Jesus still expects his followers to be like those early followers and grasp the opportunities that present themselves as we journey on with the church.

And as we plan what church will look-like in the coming months, we can expect some challenges to overcome on our journey.

But we face those challenges knowing Jesus is with us sharing our concerns, shouldering parts of our difficulties and always keeping before our eyes the eternal promise he has opened up for us through his death on the cross and the empty tomb in the garden.

Peace be with you

Amen.