

Sunday 11th July 2021 – Acts 8:1,26-40 ‘A divine appointment’

Back when we lived in London, for a while my role at church was to look after new Christians. It was a great privilege, and an amazing three years seeing God at work. I heard so many stories of **how God had met people at particular points in their lives, and drawn them to his love.**

I remember meeting one young woman for example, who had just become a follower of Jesus. The story goes that her boyfriend was coming home from work one day and passing through Clapham Junction station. Members of our church were handing out fliers for the forthcoming Alpha Course. The boyfriend had taken a leaflet without thinking about it, but when he saw what it was, as soon as he got home he threw the leaflet in the bin. The young woman had also arrived home from work some time later and at some point had noticed the leaflet in the bin. She fished it out, decided to attend the course and a few weeks later became a Christian. All because her boyfriend had thrown a leaflet in the bin at just the right moment.

‘The time has come and the kingdom of God has come near.’ That is what Jesus declares as he begins his public ministry. And this is the truth that lies at the heart of our humanity. For all that we often might *feel* that God is not near, the reality is different. **God is near to us.** God is quietly at work in our lives. God is drawing us to himself. And most of us will have stories of what appear to be co-incidences but might better be described as God-incidences in our lives. A time when God somehow intervened to bring us just the right person when we needed it, or lead us to just the right scripture, or provide us with just the right unexpected blessing.

We see a famous example in our passage for today. But let’s recap by observing that Philip only finds himself in this situation because of the persecution that breaks out against the fledgling Christian community after Stephen’s death. This is a much bigger-scale example of a similar idea – that God is accomplishing his divine work even in the toughest of circumstances. The religious authorities were trying to stamp the church out: but they only succeeded in spreading it. Chapter 8 begins with the words: ‘All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.’ The church which had largely been centred on Jerusalem now fans out across the rest of the country, and, as the text goes on to say in verse 4, ‘those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.’

So, far from stopping it, they unleashed the floodgates, and worse still, empowered a new, emerging group of leaders to do so – Philip included. Of course we’ve seen much the same over the last year. Our government authorities weren’t trying to shut the church down per se (it was a blanket ban on all gatherings), but we’ve observed numerous times that the lockdown, far from destroying the church, only released a new wave of mission online, and practical care in the most testing of circumstances, re-energising the church and giving millions more people the opportunity to engage with faith at some level. This is how God works – the true church flourishes when it is tested. God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

But back to Philip – after an amazing ministry in Samaria he is now led south to a particular road which leads out of Jerusalem, and here he has an extraordinary ‘divine appointment’. **God leads him to a particular person at a particular time**, and it just so happens that the person he is led to is reading probably the best passage in the whole Old Testament from which to explain what the Messiah was going to do – Isaiah chapter 53. Coincidence? Or God-incidence?

Philip naturally wasn’t going to pass up this opportunity, so he shares the good news of Jesus. Then the official himself takes the initiative and asked to be baptised – and so in one afternoon a new convert is added, who will also take his new faith back to a new country. It is notable that Ethiopia is known to have one of the oldest continuous church communities in the world, and even now has a large Christian population. And it all starts with one bloke approaching a chariot and having a conversation.

I read a great book last year called ‘The Ten Second Rule’ by Clare de Graaf. It’s really an encouragement to encourage Christians to live a bit more like Philip, being open to what you might call ‘divine appointments’. The central idea is this:

‘Within ten seconds, do the next thing you’re reasonably sure Jesus wants you to do, and you could change a life forever.’

What does that mean? It means that **all of us occasionally feel ‘nudges’ to do something**: we see someone and feel we need to go and talk to them; we remember somebody from out of the blue and get an urge to give them a call; we suddenly want to make a donation or offer help to a particular cause and we’re not sure why this cause touches us when we’ve had dozens of requests recently – and so on.

The point the author is making is that if we get a nudge to do something like this, we need to act on it in ten seconds or we won’t do it. We’ll walk past the person, we’ll forget to make the call, we’ll find reasons why doing this or that might not be such a good idea. What if they don’t want to talk? What if I make a mess of it? I do this all the time, I suspect many of you do as well!

If we believe that God is near and is at work in our lives, then we can be fairly sure that these nudges are no accident, **they might in fact be God prompting us to do something**. But if we decide to ignore the ‘nudge’ we might also miss an opportunity which might have changed someone’s life for good.

When we talk about ‘faith’ in the Christian life we often apply it to big things like the general direction of our lives, or our salvation or eternal future. But the great thing about this simple rule is that **it puts faith at the heart of the little things we do each day**. Faith becomes a real thing that is lived out in bite-size chunks. Philip got to change not just a life but a country. The church member who spent an hour handing out leaflets in the station to bored commuters unwittingly changed a life too. If we learn to act on these little nudges, who knows how God might use us? What coincidences will God bring you this week?