

29 April 2018 - Saint Peter's Joint Service,

Acts 8, 26-end; John 15, 1-8.

Revd John McGrath

Guided both by an angel and by the Holy Spirit, Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch to believe in Jesus as saviour and Lord. We too can make disciples if we are led by the Holy Spirit, know the gospel message itself and are sensitive to the people we talk to. The Ethiopian was already interested in God. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship God even though he was not a Jew. He was reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. Philip began with that scripture to help him understand who Jesus is. The prophet Isaiah wrote, 'like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before it's shearers, so he does not open his mouth.' This is what happened with Jesus following his arrest and before his crucifixion. So, Philip could explain the gospel about the death and resurrection of Jesus and how that could change the Ethiopian's life. So the man asked to be and was baptised as a Christian.

We have a problem helping people respond to the gospel because very few people read the Bible. Philip started with the scripture which the Ethiopian had been reading. When speaking to people who never read the bible we can't just quote scriptures to them. We may have to start with questions about the meaning of life, something on TV or a story about the state of the world. Most people would like the world to be a better place. So rather than quoting scripture we could ask them how they would want the world to be changed for the better. We could help them see that their desire is, in fact, to see this world become the kingdom of God. We could then talk about Jesus preaching the kingdom of God, giving people a new relationship with God and that by following him they could seek to build the kingdom on earth. If you want to make disciples, there is something more that you need. You must know what the gospel message is. That means having a good understanding of the Bible.

One reason for having the Bible marathon at St Stephen's on 9 June is that every word of the Bible will be read in that church on that particular day. Of course, it is not only a St Stephen's event but is for every member of both our churches. Other people will be invited to come along. I urge you to volunteer to read from and listen to the bible passages. I cannot stress enough how important Bible knowledge is for Christians. How can we know the things of God if we are not familiar with the word of God from scripture? It is the written word of the Bible which reveals the living Word who is Jesus.

In John 15 we read that we are branches of the Vine who is Jesus. If we abide in him we will bear much fruit. But apart from him we can do nothing. So how do we abide or remain united to Jesus? If any relationship is to be sustained we have to keep communicating with the other person. To deepen our relationship with Jesus we must be communicating with him. That can be done through prayer. But I suggest that our prayer life is less effective if our knowledge of the Bible is limited. To keep a good relationship with Jesus we have to read the Word of God especially in the gospels. If someone stops reading the bible they are more likely to fall away and their relationship with Jesus can end. They fail to make disciples or to grow in their own discipleship. The end result can be that they stop attending church or being a Christian.

Jesus said, 'I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.' In English translation we have different words for clean and prune for what in Greek is the same word καθαροί, (katharoi). The pruning or cleansing for a Christian is through the words that Jesus has spoken which we find in the Gospels. To fulfil the diocesan vision of making disciples we must be fruitful disciples ourselves. That involves knowing the word of God. We are pruned, challenged and changed by that word. As we are led by the Holy Spirit in reading the Bible, we become aware of things in our own life that God wants to deal with. If we ask, then God will deal with them because he is merciful, forgiving and wants the best for us. God wants us to grow ever closer to him, to become more and more in love with him, and to desire his will for our lives. It is God's will that we share with those who don't yet know him, our own joy in our relationship with God. Through regular reading of the bible and praying we abide in Christ and his words abide in us. From John 15 we read, 'those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.' Jesus also says, 'if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.' That is what I long for not only for myself but for you: to grow as disciples. Let us trust in our Lord's own words. Let us ask the Father to help us bear much fruit to his glory.

Amen.