

Session 2: The Sending Jesus Transcript

Hello and welcome to the second session of our Lent Course, Knowing Jesus.

In the first session we focused on the Ascended Jesus in Acts chapter 1. Through that Ascension, Jesus released the Holy Spirit on the Church through which the apostles were sent to the whole world to declare the Good News of Jesus Christ. So this week we are looking at the Sending Jesus and our focus will be on Acts Chapter 8 verses 26 to 40 and the fabulous story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch.

I was on a train a few weeks ago, dressed in clericals, when I met someone who said out of the blue, 'I've got the same sort of job as you.' Assuming he was a priest or a minister, I asked him where his church was and he said, 'Oh no, I'm a motivational coach.' And then he told me at very considerable length what he did. 'My job is to help people find strength and motivation from within themselves,' he boasted. 'I help them set their personal goals, work out what energises them and address the blockages such as self-doubt and procrastination so that they can unlock their inner drive and resources.'

Goodness me, I was totally exhausted from just listening to him, so I dread to think what life must have been like for his clients. Though the fact that we were in the cheap seats on an off-peak train suggested he maybe didn't have too many of them.

What interested me, though, is that he assumed we were in the same line of work, that my job as a Bishop is to unlock something that people have within them, inside of them. It's as if the answers to our problems lie within ourselves. But if I were to start looking for motivation from within myself, I really don't think I would get very far. If my motivation were entirely self-generated, all I'd do is laze around watching football and eating pizza. The thing about Christians is that we don't look for motivation from within ourselves. We find it from another source altogether.

To work out what motivates Christians and sends us out to make a difference, let's look at Philip. I love the way that, in the first part of Acts, amazingly vivid characters walk in, take the stage, and then leave again to let someone else take over, and in Chapter 8 it is Philip's turn. And wow, is he a motivated man!

The young Church of which he is a part is facing a terrible persecution. But rather than being terrified into cowering away, Philip uses that danger to share the Gospel with ever greater energy and heads off to Samaria. There he casts out demons and heals the sick. He squares up to a magician and eventually brings him to faith. It's all going so well, and then just when he is really enjoying himself and getting the attention of the wider church, the Spirit uproots him and sends him onto the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He is in the middle of nowhere, on his own, on a deserted track.

But again tribulation just doubles his motivation. He sees a rich man in a chariot, an influential Eunuch from the Ethiopian Queen and so a gentile. And at the Spirit's prompting Philip goes and speak to him.

Now picture the scene. This Ethiopian is bombing along in his chariot and so the only way Philip can keep up is to run at his side at the same speed as the horses. You can imagine Philip, pegging along as fast as his little legs would carry him, trying with all his heart to teach this lost man all about the Scriptures. That's how motivated Philip is. He's like Tigger on a triple espresso. There is nothing this man won't do to share the Gospel.

So what is it that motivates him? The story tells us so let's follow I through. Philip discovers that the Eunuch is trying to make sense of Isaiah Chapter 53. *'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.'* Then in Acts 8, 35 we hear what Philip does about that discovery. , *'...starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.'*

Now annoyingly Luke does not record exactly what Philip said to the Eunuch to explain the passage. So let's do some thinking and try and imagine it. Assuming the Eunuch was reading his way through Isaiah 53, he would just have come across these words, *'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.'* Sheep are so intent on their food that they can get lost in the search for an especially delicious patch of grass. And because they are herd animals, there is a risk that they copy each other and many get lost together.

That's what Isaiah is saying has happened to the whole of the nation of Israel. They have been so busy chasing their own greedy desires that they have got lost together. Their sin has led them astray. And that's not just Israel. That is the human condition. We are lost, separated from God because of our sin. And that sin leads to death.

That is the problem. So then Isaiah goes on to gives the solution which is this; *'The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'* Isaiah claims that the sin of everyone is to be laid on one individual, an individual he compares to a lamb being led to the slaughter.

So what does this all mean? At the time of Isaiah the Jewish people offered animals, especially lambs. Instead of a human dying because of their sin, the animal would die in the human's place so that sinful people could be reunited with a holy God. But the prophets kept arguing that this system wasn't working.

So instead Isaiah prophesies, a Suffering Servant will take on his own shoulders the punishment that the people deserve. Like a lamb to the sacrifice he will be led to the slaughter. And there can be no doubt at all that Philip would have told the Eunuch that that prophecy has been fulfilled in Jesus. In Jesus God himself comes to be the sacrifice. That's why John the Baptist points to Jesus in John's Gospel and says, *'There is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'* Jesus is the sacrifice. Jesus steps

in and dies on our behalf the death that we deserve because of our sins. And so by his death we are free.

I remember at school once a pupil had smashed a window with an illicit tennis ball. Our teacher said that no one could leave the class to go out for lunchbreak until the culprit owned up. So a stand-off began. Eventually, after about twenty minutes, a boy stood up and said, ‘It was me.’ We all went out to play and the poor boy was led off to be punished. However it wasn’t him at all. He took the punishment so that the rest of us could be free. That’s what Jesus has done. He has stepped in and died the death we deserve, and by so doing has released us.

The word Christians use for this is Atonement, or At-one-ment. Through the sacrificial death of the Son, we are made one with the Father. And that is incredibly Good News. We are free. Free from sin, free from death, free to be fully alive, free to be the people God intends us to be, free for joy. And we are free not because of our own efforts or by our own strength, but because of what Jesus has done on the cross. We are free simply because we have placed our faith in Jesus and in his cross.

That gift of freedom is what motivated Philip. That gift of freedom is what motivates billions of Christians throughout history and today. We are motivated not because of anything from within ourselves, but by what Jesus has done for us in setting us free through his death on the cross.

Our aim in this course is twofold, to know about Jesus and to know Jesus. So far in this session we have done some knowing *about*. We have learnt how the sacrificial death of Jesus sets us free. But what about *knowing* Jesus? What does it mean to know the Jesus who gave his life on the cross? As Philip shows, to know him is to be sent by him. To know him is to be motivated to share the good news of his saving work.

A lot of churches want to grow but they struggle to achieve it. A lot of Christians want to share their faith but they struggle to know where to begin. The problem usually is motivation. If your motivation is institutional survival or guilt, it won’t get far. The only effective motivation is our joy in what Jesus has done for us. When you, like Philip, are delighting that Jesus has died to set you free, you’re going to want everyone to know that good news. That’s why in Acts, the moment the disciples finally understood what Jesus had done, they travelled the world to tell everyone. Their joy in the triumph of Jesus was so profound that it spilt out all over.

Jesus has given his life for you. And now he sends you to share that news so that others might know life in him as well. And there are two ways of doing that.

The first is to live the cross. What we see in the dying of Jesus is the most crazy, beautiful, fabulous act of self-giving love the world has ever seen and will ever see, an act of love so profound and unprecedented that it re-engineers the cosmos and brings

about a new creation. Jesus has stepped in and died our death for us. Why? He just did. Because he loves us. There can be no explanation beyond that.

So to be sent is to live out that kind of self-giving love in our own lives, a love that is motivated not from within but by the cross. And that is much practical than you might think. Every time you do something positive for another person without wanting anything back yourself you are living out that self-giving love.

When you give generously to your church or to a charity, that's self-giving love. When you volunteer for a charity or a community project, that's self-giving love. When you stand up for right in the workplace even if there is a personal cost to that decision, that's self-giving love. When you make time to be with a bereaved person even months and years into their grief, that's self-giving love. When you make time for those people whom others find hard: the addict, the person with mental health problems, the one who struggles to relate or make conversation, that's self-giving love. When you step back from a leadership role to release another person, that's self-giving love.

The cross is not just a theological idea. It is a lifestyle that you can choose every single day. And when you choose that lifestyle, you are doing something incredibly powerful which is bearing witness to what Jesus does on the cross. Just by your actions, you are bearing witness to the saving power of the sacrificial death of Jesus.

And the second way of sharing the good news is to declare the cross. It is to bear direct witness to its saving power. I have always hung a cross over the bed of every bedroom in my house. That simple action is a challenge to many people and has led to plenty of conversations. So be aware of the power of the symbol. Wear the cross, or hang one in your house.

But also, be ready to give some explanation of it. Have some words with which you can explain what Jesus has done. That does not need to be a perfectly formed theological formula. Just ask yourself – how has Jesus set me free by the cross? Or even more simply, what difference does the cross of Jesus make to the way I live my life? There are many ways of answering that question. What would your answer be? '*Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you*,' St Peter writes. What would your reason be?

Jesus saves us through the cross. Jesus sends us to declare the cross. And what motivates us in that work? Our motivation does not come from within. It comes from without, it comes from Jesus and our utter and total joy that he has died to set us free. It is the cross that motivates us to declare the cross. Or as St Paul writes, it is the love of Christ that compels us.