

MATT 5.6 & ACTS 8.26-39: HUNGERING AND THIRSTING FOR GOD

[Baptismal Service, Sunday morning 9 October 2011, Chelmsford]

Have you ever gone through somebody's dustbin, looking for something to eat? If not, then I suspect you have never been hungry – or at least, never been really hungry. Fair enough, you may have been out for a long walk, done without lunch, and come back home saying, 'I'm starving', 'I'm absolutely famished'. But the reality would have been different. Most of us could go without food for a week and be no worse for the experience; for most of us are over-fed, and many of us are over-weight.

When Jesus said, '**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled**' (Matt 5.6) he was speaking to people who knew what it was like to be hungry. For life in 1st century Palestine was hard – most people were not far off the breadline. Wages were incredibly low – and if ever there was one day's unemployment, then actual hunger would have invaded the home. Yes, many of his hearers would have experienced hunger. Doubtless many of them would have experienced thirst too; for them there was no such thing as water on tap.

This was the context in which Jesus said: "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness**" (NRSV) – "**Blessed are those who long to become right with God**" (GNB). I.e. Blessed are those who long to see God at work in their lives, freeing them from the destructiveness of sin, and enabling them to reflect something of God's goodness in their lives. Almost certainly Jesus had in mind personal righteousness, not social righteousness. If with every fibre and sinew in your body you long to be right with God, you will be satisfied.

My mind goes to Psalm 42.1,2: "**As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for you, the living God**".

If you long with God with such intensity, God will make himself known to you. Yes, blessed are those who have such a passionate desire to be right with God, for God will meet that desire to the full.

Over these last few Sundays we have begun to look at the beatitudes. Today we have reached the third beatitude. But, on this baptismal Sunday morning I want to link this beatitude about hunger and thirsting for God, with the story of the Ethiopian, who travelled vast distances in search of God.

This Ethiopian, Luke tells us, was "**an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia**" (Acts 8.27). In our terms, he was the 'Chancellor of the Exchequer', the equivalent of George Osborne. *

He was one of the top people in Ethiopia - probably the most important person outside the royal family.

He "**had been to Jerusalem to worship God**" (8.27). There were no diplomatic reasons for his journey - he hadn't been to Jerusalem for a conference of finance ministers concerned about some Middle East country defaulting on its debt repayments.

He had gone “**to worship God**”. The clear implication is that he was a man in search of God. Dissatisfied with the pagan worship of idols and perhaps the speculation of Greek philosophers, he undertook a journey of many days & nights in the hope that he might discover reality in the God of the Jews.

In one sense the Ethiopian was a highly unusual person - he was unusual in the kind of man he was & in the position he held - he was also unusual in the lengths he was prepared to go to find God. Yet the dissatisfaction which he felt & which in turn caused him to seek for God is surely typical of many, if not all of us.

Dr Karl Stern, a Jewish psychiatrist, once said: “*Man has been created a God-addict*” - what’s more, while drug addiction can be cured, God-addiction cannot.

It is a significant fact that no person/tribe/nation has ever succeeded in finally shaking off the conviction that life has a spiritual dimension. People like Stalin and Mao tried to eradicate religion, but they couldn’t.

It has been said that “*Like the proverbial elephant with a prodigious memory, man cannot forget that he is made in the image of a God to whom he can relate*” (Derek Williams).

Certainly this was true of the Ethiopian. He could not push the thought of God away.

He was resolved to search for God - and in seeking him, he found him.

In searching for & then finding God he proved the truth of words written in Hebs 11.6:

“Whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those that seek him”.

For God rewarded his faith in sending Philip to him.

Luke tells us that Philip was walking along “**the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza**” (8.26) when he heard the Ethiopian reading from the Book of the prophet Isaiah – presumably the Ethiopian had bought a scroll of Isaiah like a kind of souvenir when he was in Jerusalem..

He heard him reading two verses from Is 53.7,8: “**Like sheep that is taken to be slaughtered, like a lamb that makes no sound when its wool is cut off, he did not say a word**” (8.32).

Philip called out “**Do you understand what you are reading?**” (8.30).

To his credit the Ethiopian was honest enough to say “*No*” and invited Philip to climb up and sit with him in his carriage (8.31). “**Tell me, of whom is the prophet saying this?**” (8.34)

If ever there was a God-given opportunity for a sermon, this was it. Philip grabbed it with both hands and “**starting from this passage told him the Good News of Jesus**” (8.35b)

2. JESUS IS GOOD NEWS

The Ethiopian’s search for God ended with a sermon. Is it wishful thinking, I wonder, for me to believe that perhaps someone’s search for God might end even with today’s sermon?

I wish we had a transcript of the sermon. All we know is that Philip preached on Isaiah 53. Whatever else he said, I am sure that the sermon would have contained at least the following two points:

i. the bad news - we're in a mess!

Philip would have begun with the bad news. We've made a mess of life. In the words of the prophet: **"All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way"** (Is 53.6).

As a generalisation Philip wouldn't have to labour this point today. Everywhere we look we see greed/pride/lust/hate rearing up their ugly heads!

But the fact of sin is less welcome when it is made particular & applied personally. **"ALL of us were like sheep that were lost, EACH OF US going his own way"**.
'Yes, Mr Chancellor, you're as much a sinner as anyone else. You may have travelled 100s of miles to worship at Jerusalem, you may be very religious, but you are still a sinner'.

Yes, if we want to find God, we must first face up to the reality of sin - to the truth of ourselves - that **"like sheep that were lost, each of us [was] going his own way"**. There is no better definition of sin than this. For the essence of sin = egocentricity. Sin is about going *my* way, and not God's way. Sin is spelt 's-I-n'. As a result of our self-centeredness we have all separated ourselves from God, and run the risk of being cut off from him eternally.

But thank God Philip didn't simply have bad news to share - he also had good news

ii) the good news - God has come to our rescue!

v35: **"Philip... told him the good news of Jesus"**.

In telling him **"the good news of Jesus"** he would have started with the death of Jesus. Martin Luther was right when he said: *"If you want to understand the Christian message, you must start with the wounds of Christ"*

In this respect the scroll was quite literally a 'Godsend'. For there in Is 53.5 the prophet wrote: **"Because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received"**.

Philip would have pointed out to the Ethiopian that what was special about the death of Jesus was not that he had died on a cross - 1000s in their time had died on crosses, but not one of them had died for the salvation of the world.

No, what was special was that **"the Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved"** (Is 53.6)

I.e. in a way which is beyond our understanding, when Jesus died, he took himself the sin of the world - he paid the price for your sins and for mine - or to put it another, he bridged the gulf between God and us.

Here lies the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

The world's great religions are all symbols of our search for God - but in Jesus God has come to us - and in dying on his cross he has opened up a way back to God.

“Mr Chancellor, your search is over. Jesus is ‘the true and living way to God’” What was true of the Ethiopian is also true of you and me. Whoever we are, Jesus is the end of our search

3. THE GOSPEL DEMANDS A RESPONSE

What else Philip said, we don't know.

All we do know is that **“As they travelled down the road, they came to a place where there was some water, and the official said, ‘Here is some water. What is to keep me from being baptised?’”** (8.36)

Do notice the form of the Ethiopian's question: **“What is to keep me from being baptised?”**

The Ethiopian did not ask: *“Why should I be baptised?”*.

Perhaps because of his contacts with Jews, who also baptized converts, he knew that baptism is no optional extra.

Certainly as far as Christians are concerned, we know that baptism is what the Risen Lord Jesus commanded, and is part of our Christian commitment.

In IC there was no such person as an unbaptised Christian.

Philip's reply is even more interesting

“You may be baptised if you believe with all your heart” (8.37)

- Philip did not say: *‘If you are old enough, you may’*. Baptism has nothing to do with age, but with faith. In this church we practise believers' baptism. The key to today's ceremony is not the quantity of water, but the quality of faith.
- Note too that Philip did not say, *‘If you are good enough you may be baptised’*. Some people say to me *‘I'd love to be baptised, but not yet - I'm not good enough yet’*. But if you felt you were good enough, then baptism would not be for you. In baptism we do not profess to be good - rather we admit our need of a Saviour. Baptism is not for those who think they are perfect, but rather for those who know they are not.

To return to Philip. To the Ethiopian he said: **“You may be baptised if you BELIEVE.....”**.

The question then arises, *‘What do we need to believe?’*

The answer is found in the Ethiopian's response: **“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”** (8.37).

Remember the context in which the Ethiopian made that confession. He made this confession of faith in the light of Philip's expounding Isaiah 53.

I.e. he was confessing that Jesus who died on a Cross, taking upon himself the sins of the world, was the Son of God.

In his own way the Ethiopian was simply saying what Paul himself was later to write to the Galatians (2.20): **“The Son of God loved me and gave his life for me”**.

I.e. Christian believing as also Christian baptism centres around Christ crucified and risen.

But there is more to what is involved

Philip did not just say “**You may be baptised if you believe**”, but went on “**If you believe WITH ALL OUR HEART**”

The believing that Philip has in mind is more than mental assent - it involves the “**heart**”, i.e. it is the kind of believing which pins its very life on that belief.

The difference between the two kinds of believing is illustrated in the story of the Frenchman, Charles Blondin, who in June 1858 crossed the Niagara Falls on a 1100 foot tight-rope. On landing on the Canadian side, he told the onlookers that he proposed to re-cross the Falls with a man on his back. ‘*Do you believe I am able to carry you across?*’, he asked one man. ‘*I certainly do*’, the man replied. ‘*Then will you let me do it?*’ ‘*Not on your life!*’ came the quick reply. He believed - but he was not willing to entrust himself totally to Blondin

“**You may be baptised if you believe with all our heart**”

To believe with all your heart involves entrusting one’s life to the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.

Baptism is the great sign and symbol of this desire.

In baptism Penny & Stephanie, Chris & Jonathan, will be entrusting themselves to the Christ who died for them and rose for them - they will be publicly giving their all to him - and in so doing will make public their resolve to cease going their way, and instead go Christ’s way.

As I end my sermon this morning, my question is this: “*What is there to keep you from being baptised?*”

As you see these four baptised, ask yourself: “*Where do I stand?*”

Have you yet begun the search for God? Or are you still searching?

The Good News that in Jesus the search is over - he has opened the way to God.

This morning we invite you to come to him - to find meaning & purpose for the present, to find forgiveness for the past, and hope for the future.

Luke ends the story by telling us that after he had been baptised, the Ethiopian “**continued on his way, full of joy**” (8.39).

Wouldn’t it be marvellous if it could be said of people this morning: they came to Central Baptist Church hungering and thirsting for God; they, heard the good news of Jesus, decided to entrust their lives to him, and then **continued** on their way, **full of joy!**