

## **Study following Sunday May 2nd 2021**

**Prepare:** Think about a time you've been able to give someone good advice.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God for those who have explained the Bible to you.

**Passage:** Read Acts 8.26-40

**Ponder:** Today's passage has many amazing and thought-provoking aspects. It follows the first part of Acts 8 when Phillip begins to evangelise the city of Samaria and is joined by Peter and John who bring a ministry of the Holy Spirit to the new Christians and also face a manipulating sorcerer named Simon. In that previous passage the Holy Spirit is the key ingredient that enables the people to fully follow Christ.

- see Acts 8.15-17

It is the Holy Spirit who also features as the driving force in our passage today.

- see Acts 8.29, 39

The author, Luke, is reminding us that this is the new and dynamic age of the Holy Spirit, and Phillip is an example of one who follows where the Spirit leads.

- How have you experienced the Holy Spirit leading you?

It can be challenging to sense the guidance of the Holy Spirit and then even more challenging to fulfil the call that comes, but reading about the work of the Spirit and the work of Jesus, in the Bible is a really good place to start.

The Ethiopian Eunuch is reading the scriptures but struggling to make sense of them.

- Have you ever struggled to grasp what a particular Biblical writer is trying to say? How did you seek to solve your questions?

It was the norm at that time to read scripture out loud, in fact personal silent reading was not really practised until at least the 400s when St Augustine describes his shock at witnessing Ambrose of Milan reading silently. As Phillip swings up into the chariot the text the Ethiopian is reading is a perfect prophetic text to point forward to Jesus.

- Nicky Gumbel asserts in his Bible in One Year notes that 'Jesus is the one to whom all the Scriptures point.' How have you found this to be true?

Phillip takes the Eunuch on a Bible study that enables him to receive the Good News, as Stott remarks, the Ethiopian's heart has been well prepared by the Holy Spirit.

This passage contains some similarities with another 'discovery' passage - that of Jesus and the travellers on the road to Emmaus - see Luke 24.13-35.

The Ethiopian may not have been able to fully access worship at the temple, but he asks confidently about Baptism. Perhaps he had been reading the section of Isaiah that mentions how Eunuchs and foreigners, who trust God will be blessed, see Isaiah 56.3-5. There is some debate as to whether this is the first gentile baptism as Luke records the first official gentile baptism of Cornelius and his household in Acts chapter 10. However, I think it very plausible that the Ethiopian was probably either a natural or converted Jew as he is mentioned having been worshipping in Jerusalem (as a Eunuch he would have been barred from entering the inner courts.)

Like those from Emmaus, the Ethiopian receives the good news with great joy, and after the departure of Phillip he goes on his way rejoicing. It seems that for all his high status and responsibility the Ethiopian rejoices at becoming fully part of God's family, welcomed as a child of God, forgiven and saved by Jesus Christ.

**Pray:** Pray for all who are puzzling about certain Bible texts, may they re-discover new meaning by looking at them through the lens of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

## **Study following Sunday May 9th 2021**

**Prepare:** Think about amazing discoveries you've made through your life.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God that the Gospel is open to all peoples and lands, that it is not restricted to a particular culture or race.

**Passage:** Read Acts 10.44-48

**Ponder:** This short passage created huge waves in the early community of Jesus' followers. Peter was called by the Holy Spirit to visit a Roman Centurion, a Gentile or non-Jew, named Cornelius. The build up to this passage involves an amazing vision that Peter saw which confused him because it seemed to say that the Gentiles should hear the good news of Jesus too - see Acts 10.9-16. Cornelius had also been told by the Holy Spirit that he needed to see a man called Peter - so he sent for him.

- It seems the Holy Spirit is enabling a Holy coincidence that will lead to a new understanding within the early church - think about a coincidence you have known that you suspect God was involved in.

Peter arrived (Acts 10.25) and was welcomed in. He then began to preach the Gospel message - first explaining his new understanding that it is for all. He proceeds to speak about the events of the first Easter and then we enter our passage for today. While Peter is still speaking about believing in Jesus and the forgiveness of sins - a message that inspired the Ethiopian to ask for baptism - the Holy Spirit came on all of them. All those present experienced a great power encounter. There was a time of spontaneous praise and speaking in tongues (or other languages) which left Peter, and his six circumcised companions, amazed and astonished. This event was seen as the Gentiles receiving what the Apostles had received at Pentecost (Acts 2.1-13), and so confirmed what Peter had stated at the start of his Sermon, a sermon he never actually finished!

- Have you ever witnessed people speaking or singing in tongues as an act of worship? It can create a powerful, joyful sound, but it can also feel exclusive to those who are unable to share in the singing or speaking.

For further study, Paul speaks about 'tongues' particularly in a somewhat puzzling passage about good order in worship in 1 Corinthians 14.

The result of this Holy Spirit outpouring was that Peter instigated a mass baptism - this would have probably been for Cornelius, his household, his servants and friends who were all present (see Acts 10.24). This account is the only biblical record of people receiving a baptism of the Holy Spirit before a Baptism of water, and so it adds to the mystery that surrounds the intertwining of the Holy Spirit and water baptism.

- Compare Baptism events that you have been to and consider how the Holy Spirit might be encountered in different ways by those baptised and their family.

Luke, the writer, shows us that the Holy Spirit has been behind the whole narrative, opening Cornelius' heart and opening Peter's mind to this breakthrough that would shock the early Church. When Peter gets back to Jerusalem to report this incredible new revelation the main bone of contention is that he ate in a Gentile's home (Acts 11.3). It seems amazing that the early Church leaders were behaving like the Pharisees that Jesus was regularly clashing with. Thank goodness that they did listen to Peter's testimony and, after some debate, the Gentiles were welcomed into the Church.

**Pray:** Pray for those who are seeking to speak the message of the Gospel into hard to reach places, pray for them to be tuned to the Holy Spirit's guiding. Pray too for us, that we are also led by the Holy Spirit to speak words of Good News to those who the Spirit is preparing to hear.

## **Study following Sunday May 16th 2021**

**Prepare:** Think about great teams you've known, maybe sporting teams, work teams or any other sort of teams.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God for those who put themselves in positions of leadership in the church such as PCC members, Churchwardens, Safeguarding and Health and Safety officers etc.

**Passage:** Read Acts 1.15-17, 21-26

**Ponder:** Luke opens his recording of the Acts of the apostles with the same event that he recorded at the end of his Gospel - the ascension of Christ. The ascension leaves the disciples waiting for the 'power to come from on high' (Acts 1.8) and while they wait it seems they've got time for some housekeeping! There is the pressing matter of the space created by Judas, whose demise is described in gory detail in the middle of our passage (Verses 18-20). The number of twelve leaders is significant as a parallel to the twelve heads of the tribes of Israel and so they set out to pick a replacement.

- Perhaps you have been involved in choosing a new team member, and recall the different aspects that are needed to be considered and strategies for choosing the right person?

The process of choosing a replacement illustrates first that there were many who had been there since the beginning of Christ's ministry, not just the twelve. Presumably this group would include the women we hear mentioned by name regularly through the Gospels as well as others who are not ever named. Luke records that Peter and the group only ever considered men for this task, perhaps due to cultural considerations or following Jesus' pattern, but later on in the early church we see Junia mentioned as a female apostle alongside Andronicus.

- See Romans 16.7, this verse has produced much debate as the female name Junia was for a number of years recorded in the male form Junias. There is also a debate about whether the verse should be translated to say Junia was 'prominent among the apostles' or 'well-known to the apostles'. The title 'Apostle' literally means one who is sent, or a messenger of some kind. Although there were twelve primary apostles, others were titled as apostles later on including Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 4.14), and James, Jesus' brother (see Galatians 1.19).

As verse 22 of our passage makes clear, the principle message these messengers carried was to bear witness to Christ's resurrection. It is the resurrection event that is seen as a 'divine vindication of both Christ's person and his work' (Stott). It is clear that for the early church the earth-shattering and eternity-connecting event of that first Easter Sunday is the game-changing message and a way to bring people to know Christ. The two potential candidates are not mentioned anywhere else but it is thought they may have been part of the 70 that Jesus sent out earlier - See Luke 10.1-23. Once Joseph and Matthias have been identified there is prayerful choosing that sees Matthias chosen as the twelfth apostle. Although the use of 'lots' sounds almost like a 'lottery', the process was carefully underpinned by prayer and considered thought.

- Think of a time the you had to make a difficult decisions between two choices - how did you come to the final choice? Were you able to pray about it and offer it to God?

**Pray:** Pray for all who hold some form of leadership role in the Church, both ordained such as Bishops, Priests and Deacons, and lay leaders. Pray too for those who lead within other denominations as they seek to honour God too.

## **Study following Sunday May 23rd 2021**

**Prepare:** Think about how you feel when you are told you have to wait for a particular event or celebration.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God for the connection between the Old and New Testaments and the way Jesus Christ unites them as he unites us with Christians from all places and times.

**Passage:** Read Acts 2.1-21

**Ponder:** The waiting for 'power from on high' that Jesus promised in Acts 1 comes to fruition in our passage today. The term 'Pentecost' is the new name for the Feast of Weeks, this was one of three major Jewish festivals and it was held 50 days after Passover to coincide with the first fruits of the Harvest - See Exodus 23.16.

The disciples were gathered together, and the Holy Spirit came. This was a multi-sensory experience of sights and sounds, note that there was the sound of a violent wind without necessarily the effect of that wind. The word for 'wind' is also the same for 'Spirit' and 'breath', and so this event could be linked back to Genesis 2 verse 7 when God breathes life into the first human being. This was clearly a supernatural experience,

- I wonder if you've experienced something you just had to attribute to the supernatural?

The wind is a sign of God's presence as Spirit. The symbolism of wind/Spirit/breath is reminiscent of some Old Testament theophanies (accounts of God making himself known to humankind) - See 2 Samuel 22:16; Job 37:10; Ezekiel 13:13)

A second symbol is fire, this is another link back to God appearing as fire in the Old Testament and also links to John the Baptist's teaching, that Jesus would baptise with 'Holy Spirit and fire' bringing judgement and a burning away of impurities. The fire and wind were external but we then read that all present were filled internally with the Holy Spirit and given the gift of speaking in different tongues. 'Being filled' is just one phrase used to describe the Holy Spirit's coming upon believers in the book of Acts, other words used are 'Baptised', 'received', 'pouring out', 'received'.

If the reception of the Holy Spirit was incredible, what happens next was even more so, as the group speak in the different languages of the many visitors from other lands who were there to celebrate the Harvest. This is a harvest of whole different kind! The list of places roughly moves across the compass points around Jerusalem - North, South, East and West. Understandably there was confusion among the listeners, so Peter, the one who had denied Jesus in front of a small crowd just 52 days before, now steps up for the biggest speech of his life. Peter's speech links the Holy Spirit event with a prophesy of Joel - see Joel 2.28-32. Joel was warning the people of a judgement to come for the people if they didn't return to God with all their heart.

- Have you ever seen a quiet person take to the stage and command an audience? Joel's prophesy is notable because instead of the Spirit falling on specific people, at specific places, at specific times for specific roles, he says the Spirit will be poured out onto all. Thus dawns the 'age of the Spirit', and the disciples are never the same again. The Holy Spirit brings confusion, but also a general outward movement. In some ways the disciples have not changed, but in other ways they will never be the same again.

**Pray:** Pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those who need encouragement and strength today. Pray too for those leaders in the world who see the only way forward is through violence, give them insight into a way towards reconciliation without bloodshed.

## **Study following Sunday May 30th 2021**

**Prepare:** Think about your own birth - about where, when, and who was there.

**Praise:** Spend time thanking God that he came to be born as one of us.

**Passage:** Read John 3.1-17

**Ponder:** Nicodemus is an intriguing character who pops up three times in the Gospel story. At first he comes to Jesus in the dark - at night (John 3.1), then we hear him defending Jesus before others who are in the dark (John 7.50-51), and finally he appears after Jesus' crucifixion, bringing spices and herbs to help Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19.39-42).

For the Jews at the time, such as Nicodemus and Jesus, what mattered was being born into the right family, being a child of Abraham. For Nicodemus, Jesus' affirmation in verse 3 challenged his view of spiritual inheritance. The phrase 'born again' may also mean 'born from above' and encompasses the idea of generation or re-generation. Nicodemus seems to assume it as 'born again' and Jesus doesn't correct him but does then fill out the idea by referring to the re-generation as linked to water and the spirit.

- How might you understand being born of water and spirit?

I am persuaded by Carson that it is to the Old Testament that we must look for an explanation, rather than to New Testament practices of water baptism which would not be of interest to a 'teacher of Israel' (verse 10).

- See Ezekiel 36.25-27

In the Ezekiel passage water and spirit come together forcefully - firstly to signify cleansing and secondly to transform the heart, enabling people to follow God fully.

Jesus goes on to look back to the incident with the snake,

- See Numbers 21.5-8 - What is Jesus (son of man) compared to in this story?

- How is the crucifixion of Jesus like putting a snake on a pole?

Jesus moves from this peculiar cure for disease and links it to God's great love for the world, and the gift he will give of his son to open up eternal life for all. The phrase translated as 'eternal life' literally reads 'life of the age to come'. This age was understood by the Jews to be an age of justice and peace and would happen at the very end of this current age. This is the first mention in John's Gospel of eternal life and refers to a life that can in some measure be experienced before the end of the age. In particular John's readers were reminded of the statement in his prologue that 'in him was life' (John 1.4), leading to the understanding that new life was found through a new birth, and that life was the eternal life found through the eternal word.

As our passage closes there is another puzzle as John states that the Son did not come to condemn the world, and yet elsewhere Jesus says 'For judgement I have come into this world' (John 9.39). Carson helps us see the distinction between judgement and condemnation, and that Jesus came for justice and judgement but not condemnation. The reality is that the world is already lost and condemned and so Jesus came to save those who are condemned by revealing his light for them to follow (there's more on this in the next few verse John 3.18-21).

- How can differentiating between judgement and condemnation help us understand Jesus' message to us today?

**Pray:** Pray for those who are seeking a birth from above today, that they would know the sprinkling of cleansing water and the release of a new compassionate heart.