
Get Up and Go: Saint Philip the Deacon And Christian Mission

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Feast of St. Philip, Deacon and Evangelist, observed
Acts 8:26-40

Last Sunday, a group of Jewish high school students visited the Cathedral of St. Philip. They had made polite inquiries and arrangements beforehand, asking one of the clergy to meet with them afterwards; and it was clear they were with us to explore the presence of God in traditions other than theirs. I was glad they were with us, and I explicitly welcomed them during the parish announcements.

What I discovered during their visit was that our service changed. Our service was different because this group of Jewish students was with us. I do not mean, of course, that we said any different prayers or sang any different hymns, or consecrated bread and wine any differently.

No, the difference was within us. When I said my prayers that Sunday, I heard those prayers differently. When I used the name of Jesus (which I do often!), when I used images of the cross, when I sang about resurrection, I found myself reflecting -quickly as it might have been" upon how those notes met Jewish ears. As I spoke and prayed and sang, I did not regret a single word. I simply heard them differently. I might even have heard them more definitely and clearly. I certainly realized the power of the name of Jesus again.

That Sunday, I remembered that context changes the way we hear things. Context even changes our comprehension of things. When any two members of a family, for instance, are discussing a third member of that family, the discussion will be quite different if that third member is actually present. When our nation's leaders discuss other countries, it matters when we know the other countries are listening!

The Episcopal Church has been re-learning this principle during recent years. When Christians are discussing homosexuality, for instance, the tone and attitude of the conversation changes dramatically if gays and lesbians are actually part of the group! And the same goes for global community. The conversation among global western Christians changes dramatically when global southern Christians are present. It is probably the case that global western and global southern Christians are, for the most part, just learning how to have such graceful and truthful conversations together!

Many of the more strident arguments occurring globally are occurring because some people did not realize that other people were "over-hearing" the conversation. Some people did not realize that other people were in the room. Of course, these other people weren't literally in the room. These other people were listening to the television coverage and following internet coverage on the World Wide Web.

Context changes things. Context changes both the way we say things and the way we hear things. And it should. Our context is our community, and community is where we have civil and graceful and truthful conversation. One of the challenges of our time is that Americans really do not know much about the people who are listening to our conversations.

Those listeners might be Muslims or Jews. Those listeners might be Iraqi citizens, they might be Nigerian Anglicans, they might be Palestinians, they might be Chinese village farmers, and they might be gays and lesbians (who are certainly, and thankfully, among us already). They are "the stranger," who is closer to us than we think!

How can the Christian Church meet this challenge? This challenge of understanding other cultures? We cannot do it by watching television and looking up items on the internet.

The Christian answer is mission. We must be strong and courageous enough to leave our homes and comfortable culture and to travel out in mission to the world. That is where we learn. Last week, that group of Jewish high school students learned much more about the Episcopal Church by visiting one (and staying all the way through our worship service!). They didn't just Google the Episcopal Church or read the latest blog about us.

The Episcopal Church has taught me that Christians are being called to mission again. We are being called to go out into the world in the name of grace and service.

Today is the feast day of St. Philip the Deacon and Evangelist, and I am glad once again that our cathedral takes him as our patron saint. Consider Philip who had the courage to leave his comfortable home in Jerusalem and to travel along a wilderness road to the South. (I realize that it may not have been courage that prodded him; Jerusalem was in the midst of a persecution that may also have led him to leave!).

It is Philip the Deacon who dares to speak to a stranger, a stranger in terms of culture, race, and gender. The stranger is an Ethiopian eunuch. But he is reading the same sacred scriptures as Philip knows. Philip is led to teach and to baptize. The Ethiopian eunuch is changed by this encounter, and so is Philip! Philip is snatched away by the spirit and finds himself at Azotus; Philip becomes a new man setting up a new home. The Christian Church itself was changed by Philip's encounter with the stranger.

Christian mission is not merely about changing other people. Christian mission is also about changing ourselves. Though missionaries throughout history have differed mightily in their tasks and character, they do seem to share one experience. Every missionary has a story of how he or she was changed by serving in another culture. He or she was changed by speaking Christian words in a foreign context.

Our Cathedral celebrates Philip today. And our Cathedral celebrates baptism today. What I have said today also applies to baptism. When we baptize new Christians into our church, and into our families, we ourselves are changed by their presence. You who are having children baptized today: remember, it is you who will be changed by their presence! And you, all of us, will be changed in the Spirit of God for the better!

As we celebrate baptism and Philip the Deacon today, I call upon us to re-engage mission. It is time to travel away from our "comfort zones," whatever they might be. Several groups in this church are already planning our next mission travels. There will be others.

"Get up and go," said the angel of the Lord to Philip. "Get up and go," says the angel to us today. Go to that lonely teen-ager playing video games that you do not understand. Go to the south! Go to south Atlanta; go to the southern hemisphere, to Ecuador and Brazil. Get up and go to England, to South Africa, to Tanzania, to China and India.

"Get up and go," and we will all be changed. We will be changed by that spirit of Jesus who said "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*