



A brief encounter.....

Acts 8 26 - 40

Introduction

Welcome to worship.

I'm Jane Edwards, one of the local preachers who usually worships at Sherwood, and together we'll explore the theme of encounters; encounters with each other and encounters with Jesus.

You are joining together with people at different times and in different locations across Nottingham North East Circuit. But not only that, you are part of a tradition of Christian worship that stretches back through time to the earliest churches, and back even further through Jewish worship including the beautiful Psalms. And stretching forward in time after you will come generations of followers as new traditions are created until we reach the vision of praise around the throne that we read about in revelation. Together we are a community with Christ as our Head. Pause, and reflect on your place in this vast community.

We begin with music that helps us to connect with that time of worship together; Come now is the time to worship.

Come now is the time to worship
Come now is the time to give your heart
Come just as you are to worship
Come just as you are before your God
Come

One day every tongue
Will confess You are God
One day every knee will bow
Still the greatest treasure remains
For those who gladly choose You now

Come now is the time to worship
Come now is the time to give your heart
Come just as you are to worship
Come just as you are before your God
Come

Brian Doerksen b 1963

Praise and thanks

Prayer

We come to you, Lord, and praise and worship you.
From every nation, from all parts of the world,
from one generation to the next, people praise and worship you.
Today, here and now, Lord, we come to praise and worship you.

Your love, O God, is for all people no matter where they are from or where they live. Your love accompanies us on our journey through life, through the good and the bad, happy and sad times and all the times between them. Your love is with us on the mountaintop and in the valley, on roads rough and smooth. You are our sustenance, our guide, our teacher and our friend. For all of this and so much more, we adore you.
Amen.

And so we share together in the prayer that Jesus taught his followers, and which has been repeated through the generations.

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your Name,
Your kingdom come
Your will be done
On earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are
yours
Now and forever
Amen

Reflecting on God's Word

Before we listen for God's Word in the Bible we ask the Holy Spirit to focus our minds on the meaning of the passage, and to inspire us as we sing The Lord's my Shepherd.

Hymn StF 481

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me lie in pastures green.
He leads me by the still, still waters,
His goodness restores my soul.

*And I will trust in You alone,
And I will trust in You alone,
For Your endless mercy follows me,
Your goodness will lead me home.*

He guides my ways in righteousness,
And He anoints my head with oil,
And my cup, it overflows with joy,
I feast on His pure delights.#
And I will trust ...

And though I walk the darkest path,
I will not fear the evil one,
For You are with me, and Your rod and staff
Are the comfort I need to know.
And I will trust ...

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part of the David C Cook family,
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This morning's passage of scripture comes from the Acts of the Apostles, the book written by the gospel writer Luke to explain what happened after Jesus' death and resurrection. It describes how a small group of men and women faced persecution and fled for safety, but courageously began to preach where they found themselves. One of these followers of Jesus was Philip. Acts tells how he first went to Samaria, and was so successful in his preaching and healing that local bogus faith healers felt their livelihood threatened. The passage that we're going to read picks up the story from there.

Acts 8 26 - 40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do

you understand what you are reading?’ Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Reflection - A Brief Encounter

Put yourself in this encounter from 2000 years ago. Imagine yourself travelling in central Israel. The heat of the day is evaporating and it is beginning to get cool, so you need to draw your woolen cloak tighter round your shoulders. Night is setting in, the sky is illuminated with stars and you have decided to stop for the night. You have joined a group of other travellers; it’s safer to stay in a group, and you have been offered hospitality from one of the travellers who seems far richer and more confident than the rest. He travels with several servants who have pitched his tent, built a fire and prepared some food. Together with the others you huddle round this fire, the light from the flames animating their faces as they share stories of their travels. When the conversation lulls and the others fall silent your rich companion begins to tell his story.

Friends listen to me. I have travelled to many countries, and seen marvelous things. If there’s one thing I know it’s that you never stop learning. And the key to learning is to listen to those you meet on your journey. You never know what they will teach you! Today, on the road I met a man who has changed my life forever. I have met a man who spoke directly to me, and has opened my eyes to so much I never realised was possible. And what is more I can introduce you to him too. But wait, I am getting ahead of myself. Let me tell you how it happened....

As you can tell I’m not from round here. I was raised in my homeland of Ethiopia, where the sky goes on forever and ever. When you people talk about a land of plenty - that is how I think of Ethiopia. It is lush, and green with good crops and fat cows. God has truly blessed the land and people from all over the world are drawn there because it is such a good place to live. There is no religious persecution like you have here, rather we are proud of our tolerance to others. Live and let live we say! You can worship whatever god you believe in. It was through one of these travellers that my family found out about Judaism, and about your God Yahweh and about his chosen nation. My father's father was converted, and it has been part of my family ever since. We have collected scrolls of sacred scripture, and they are prized possessions I can tell you!

God has been good to me, and I am so proud of my family. As my father’s first son I took my place in the household of the Queen mother, a good and fair ruler. All first-born males in my family are courtiers to the royal household. It means I have a good education, and a responsible job. I can read and write as well as any man alive, and have a good head for figures.

Growing up I read stories about the great city of Jerusalem, and as a believer in Yahweh I longed to see it for myself. I begged my Queen and she graciously allowed me to make the pilgrimage, so here I am in Israel! I made it all the way to Jerusalem. I stayed for several days, and listened to some great teachers. I made my sacrifice at the temple, and talked with people in the marketplace. There seemed to be trouble brewing, some sort of disturbance. They told me a man had been executed not long ago for claiming that he was the King of the Jews, and impossibly his followers had claimed that they had seen him alive. Although it couldn't be true I felt the tension in the air. I decided that Jerusalem is not a safe place to be at the moment so I set off for home with my servants.

We were travelling down the road to Gaza when it happened. I was reading the writings of the great prophet Isaiah. I was always taught to read the scriptures as a child. My father told me 'Follow these laws and you will be an honest and upright man'. And so every day I read the scripture - learning much of it off by heart. I learnt to live by its teachings and follow its commands. On this day, whilst I read a dirty looking man ran towards me on the road. As he got closer he shouted for me to stop. For a moment I was unsure what to do, it is not uncommon to be approached by beggars on the road from Jerusalem. Some of them are half crazed, and you can never be too sure whether they are going to pull a knife on you, why should I stop for this man, and take the risk of being robbed? But something made me look more closely at him. He looked disheveled, certainly, but there was something insistent in his request. I motioned to my servants for them to stop.

The man looked relieved, but not surprised. He shouted towards me 'Do you understand what you've just read?' Well, let me ask you, how would you feel if some beggar tried to give you advice about how to read Scriptures? Would you take notice of what some scrounger says about your holy book?

Normally I would think exactly the same, but something made me stop and answer him. I'll humour him I thought. He looked half-crazed but harmless. So I replied, 'How can I understand it if there is no-one to explain it to me?' I motioned for him to join me in my carriage and explain himself. He did so eagerly, looking me straight in the eye. 'If you really want to understand' he said, 'then you are right to ask for help. It is only when we truly seek God's interpretation, when we submit to his Spirit, that God will reveal himself to us through his word. A friend of mine once told me "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you". If you humble yourself before God he will draw near.'

And that's when the miracle happened my friends. That's when I started to read the Scriptures for real. Passages that I had read many times over I read again, and they suddenly made sense! There was no blinding light, no earthquake, no storm, but I heard God speak to me nevertheless, and I was sure of his voice. Elijah was right. God drew near with a still small voice. What an experience.

I said that today I met a man who changed my life, and that is true - and I imagine you think I'm talking about the beggar. But it wasn't him who changed my life, it was the man that he introduced me to. As we read together the passage from Isaiah, I asked this beggar who Isaiah was talking about. Was Isaiah referring to himself when he spoke? The beggar smiled. 'I have met the man that Isaiah was talking about, he told me 'He is Jesus Christ, my friend, who lived and taught in Galilee, who was put to death by the authorities for preaching freedom, and who was raised by his Father God. Through his death and resurrection he has become my Saviour. My Saviour and yours!'

As we travelled along together he talked a great deal about his friend. He introduced me to this Jesus, and I came to know him. We came upon a lake, and I asked my servants to stop once more. I felt that I needed a sign of my new understanding. My life will not be the same, and I

needed to recognise that in some way. I asked my companion if I could be baptised. 'No reason why not' he said, and smiled.

Strangely enough, as soon as I came out of the water, my companion had disappeared, but I felt so grateful to have met him! I'm so glad that I stopped and shared time together on our journey. I feel like singing God's praises from the highest mountain. I want to get home as soon as possible to tell my people about my discovery. I can't wait to tell my family about Jesus.

For the rest of my journey today, until I reached this camp, I have continued to read the Scriptures. And the more I read, the more I learn. Listen to what else Isaiah says ' Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say 'the Lord will surely exclude me from his people, and let not a eunuch complain 'I am only a dry tree', For this is what the Lord says 'to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose to please me, and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give a name better than sons and daughters. The Lord says, 'My house will be a house of prayer for all nations!' And that, my friends, means all of us.

Now that you have heard his story, what have you learnt?
Have you ever struck up a conversation with a stranger? What happened?
Who has taught you on life's journey?
How can you share with others on their journey?

Take a moment to reflect and pray.

Prayers for others, and for ourselves

We turn to prayer for others and for ourselves. Pause after each line in lighter type and reflect on those people and situations that the Holy Spirit prompts you to think about. If you feel comfortable say the words in darker type out loud.

To all those in need of love:

let the love of God be known.

To a world in need of love:

let the love of God be shown.

To those in need of food:

let the love of God be shared.

By those in need of healing:

let the love of God be experienced.

By those in need of peace:

let the love of God be felt.

By those in need of hope:

let the love of God be seen.

To those in need of joy:

let the love of God be sung.

By those in need of justice:

let the love of God be heard.

By all those in need of love:

let the love of God be known.

Amen.

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We finish our worship with a great hymn of praise that brings our thoughts and prayers together -
Thine be the Glory.

Hymn - StF 313

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won;
angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave-clothes where thy body lay.

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

Lo, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let the church with gladness hymns of triumph sing,
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of Life;
life is naught without thee: aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors through thy deathless love;
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

Blessing

May the Lord bless you on your journeys with others and may he open your eyes to see Him more clearly through your encounters.

Amen.