

Called to Transforming Encounters

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- [0 : 0 0] And this morning I was asked to speak on called to transforming encounters. Some of you might think, what does that mean? Some of you might think, oh, please don't ask me to have to go and speak to anyone and have a transforming encounter.
- And some of you might be thinking, yeah, let's go. I'm sure that's Dave Sims if he's in the room. But first of all, I think we need to look at what do we mean by transforming encounters?
- And what did this passage mean? Why, out of all of the transforming encounters that took place in the early church, was this one singled out?
- But first of all, I'd like to just show a little video clip and then I'd like to ask a couple of questions about it. Hey, life is crazy, is it not?
- I'm such a heavy tumour. How many people know who that lady is, have seen or heard or know anything about her?
- [1 : 1 3] This was just a woman in America and she bought that mask for her children but it made her laugh.
- So in the car she videoed herself laughing in the Chewbacca mask because it made the sound of Chewbacca from Star Wars. And that clip of her in her car with the mask on went absolutely viral within hours.
- And she, as a result, she was on James Corden's Late Show. She was on Good Morning America. She was on Oprah Winfrey. She just went absolutely mega.
- She's written a book. It's just gone absolutely mental. Now, it turns out in her interviews that she is also a Christian and she does believe in, she's got a very sort of vibrant sense of humour.
- And I think God just used who she was naturally. The fact that none of you have heard about it kind of blows the first point of my sermon.
- [2 : 2 7] But we'll forget about that. So anyway, I was going to ask you two questions, neither of which you will know the answer. So my question was going to be, what does that clip have to do with the sermon today?
- Well, the first point was her name's Candice. And the queen that the Ethiopian worked for, her title was the Candice of Ethiopia.
- The second was the fact that both Philip's message to the Ethiopian and her message on Facebook went viral.
- But they obviously went viral in completely different ways. So in the day when Philip met with the Ethiopian and had their transforming encounter, there was no internet, there was no mobile phone to video it and upload it to Facebook and Twitter.
- There were not even planes, trains and automobiles. And yet, their conversation spread the message of the gospel around the world.
- [3 : 3 9] I want to look at how and why that happened. In order to do that, I felt like we needed to just have a quick whistle-stop tour through the early church.

So Jesus has been crucified. He rose from the dead and he met with his disciples. They're all petrified in Jerusalem. And Jesus comes to them and he says, I'm going to go to my Father in heaven now.

But you need to wait here and you are going to receive the Holy Spirit. And when you've received the Spirit, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem.

But also in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. If Jesus had come to us today to say that, he'd be saying, wait in Bristol, you'll receive the Holy Spirit, but you're going to be my witnesses in all in Bristol, but also in the whole of the southwest and even to the ends of the earth.

But don't forget, they had no internet to just post online. So they probably had no idea how they were going to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

[5 : 01] Nonetheless, they do what Jesus asked them. They wait in Jerusalem. They receive the Holy Spirit. And I'm sure some of you know the story. Amazing things begin to happen and the church begins to grow at a phenomenal rate.

On the day they receive the Holy Spirit, Peter gets up to preach and 3,000 people give their life to God after that one sermon. So they begin to build community together and they begin to share fellowship with each other.

They meet to pray. They meet to look at what God would want of their lives. And God continues to add daily people to this community that is growing alive in faith.

They are so transformed themselves that the book of Acts tells us that they even begin to share their possessions.

I think that's miraculous. I think that would take some really amazing transformation for us all here to suddenly get up and say, yeah, I've got a car, you can have it.

[6 : 19] Yeah, I don't need my house moving with us. We've got two spare bedrooms. They begin to share everything. They begin to sell everything they've got and they begin to give money to anyone who needs it.

So first of all, they themselves are transformed before they go out and start transforming other people. But as they continue to grow and miracles are taking place in Jerusalem, the officials don't like it and they start to think of ways that they can slow down the phenomenal growth of this new community.

But it does keep growing. They get to 5,000. It says, Acts tells us then, that even priests begin to believe and they start being added to the church and officials begin to believe and miracles are taking place.

So the apostles are no longer able to keep doing what they believe they're called to do, which is to pray and to bring the word of God.

So they choose seven other men to take over the administration of this huge new community that's growing. And Philip, who we hear about in the reading today, is one of those men.

[7 : 50] Another one of those men is a man called Stephen, who is also performing miracles and people are coming to faith through encounters with him.

So at this point, the officials in Jerusalem really want to put a stop to the growth of this community and so they drag Stephen to court.

They bring some trumped up charge against him and they stone him to death. At that point where Stephen is stoned to death, the church is persecuted and scattered and they have to flee for their lives.

So they flee. Where do you think they flee to? From Jerusalem, where do you think they go? I know somebody in the congregation knows the answer.

So Jesus has said, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. So when they're scattered from Jerusalem, where do you think they go?

[9 : 00] They go firstly to Judea and Samaria. They get scattered and that's their nearest neighbours. So it would be like us having to flee our homes here.

We'd go to the other parts of the south west or we'd go to where we'd got family. We'd go to local cities round about. You might be asking yourself, what was that all about?

Why would God allow the church to be broken up and persecuted like that when it's growing at such an amazing rate? Well the answer lies in what Jesus has told them they're going to do.

They're amazing witnesses in Jerusalem and things are happening beyond their wildest dreams. But I wonder if maybe they were getting a little bit comfortable and used to those things happening and they were enjoying what was happening because it was all good.

So they're persecuted and scattered and they flee to Judea and Samaria and what do you think they do there? Go into hiding? No.

[10 : 11] They start sharing their message there as well. So now the gospel isn't only being accepted by people in Jerusalem, it's being accepted by people in Judea and Samaria which is what Jesus said would happen.

So the church community begins to grow and be established there. The persecution, the stoning of Stephen, none of these things can stop the spread of the message of the gospel and Philip is the one in the book of Acts that is named as being responsible for the church in Samaria being established because he goes to Samaria, he preaches the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ and what he's done for us and the church, the people in Samaria accept his message and they also are added to this new vibrant community of believers.

So there he is in Samaria sharing the good news. So they've witnessed in Jerusalem and the ones that are scattered have witnessed in all of Judea and all of Samaria.

At this point, an angel, we're told in the reading, comes to Philip and says, just go south of the city today and go to the road that runs between Jerusalem and Gaza.

Now the angel doesn't tell him why he's got to go but he hears and he goes. He doesn't know what's going to happen there but he goes in the heat of the day at an inconvenient time to a hot and dusty desert road simply because he believes that God has asked him to do so.

[12 : 03] And as he goes and he gets to the road, he sees a chariot. Now this road was the main road out of Jerusalem. So this chariot's leaving Jerusalem and he hears someone in the chariot reading scriptures out loud to himself.

And so he sidles up, Philip does, alongside this chariot and starts to ask the man inside who is the Ethiopian, do you understand what you're reading?

The Ethiopian is reading from the book of Isaiah and he's reading it out loud as Jews especially are prone to do. And in ancient biblical times that's how most people read out loud.

So Philip says, do you understand what you're reading? And the Ethiopian says, well, I can't really unless someone explains it to me. So Philip takes that opportunity to explain that the passage the Ethiopian is reading is about Jesus and Philip begins to share his message with this Ethiopian.

Now at this point I ask myself, well, Philip's been sharing that message everywhere and everyone's been hearing him, believing him and agreeing with him.

[13 : 26] So why is this particular encounter special and highlighted in the Bible? And as I researched, I found out it was because in those days the sort of Jewish, Roman, Grecian world believed that Ethiopia, the top of the Nile region, was the end of the earth.

And Jesus had said, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So God doesn't send Philip and the disciples to the ends of the earth, he brings the ends of the earth to them. And there's the Ethiopian and he is a wealthy Ethiopian, he works for the Queen of Ethiopia, he's her treasurer and he's going back after what he was doing in Jerusalem, taking part in the festivals, he's heading back to Ethiopia.

So Philip gets this opportunity to share the good news with this Ethiopian and that encounter transforms the Ethiopian's life, so much so that he stops the carriage and he says, there's some water I need to get baptised and give my life to Jesus.

Lottie has been baptised this morning, she has had a transforming encounter with the Holy Spirit and he will continue to shape and mould her life and as family and friends and particularly as parents and godparents, you have a very specific role to play in that, you will be like Lottie's Philip, it is your responsibility to share the good news with her so that she understands it like the Ethiopian was then able to understand what he was reading because Philip shared it with him.

[15 : 37] So this transforming encounter takes place and the Ethiopian carries on his way back to Ethiopia and takes the good news that he's received with him and spreads the gospel message to the ends of the earth and we are recipients of that message.

So this morning I want to just kind of leave a couple of questions with you regarding what transforming encounters are either one taking place in our life.

I think it's really easy to assume that whenever we read passages in the Bible we're always the Philip we're always going to be the one that sent and that is true God does want us to take that gospel message but I would just wonder how often we're aware that we might be the Ethiopian in the passage and God might be sending someone to us to transform our lives so be aware of encounters through which we can be transformed and then secondly be aware of encounters that God does want to use us to transform other people and that can happen in two ways in Samaria Philip publicly proclaimed and preached the gospel and crowds were coming to faith Lottie has taken part in a public declaration of faith in Christ this morning but secondly

Philip had an opportunity to share a personal testimony with the Ethiopian no one watching it didn't go on social media anywhere he didn't get public recognition for it in fact he just disappeared at the end of that encounter but the passage tells us that the Ethiopian just went on his way rejoicing anyway and he took that good news with him so these encounters aren't for fame and fortune therefore what God wants to do in our life and in the lives of the people that we do encounter so go in faith but go in courage as well that God in us will give us what we need in those individual situations and I'll just leave you with one encounter that stayed with me for a really long time

I was at Bible college before studying Greek and used to have to translate 10 verses of scripture every week and they used to take me hours I'd spread them out all my books it'd be like three hours before I got through them one weekend I was going to London to stay with a friend and I thought I'll just find a quiet little corner on the train get my homework done and out the way then I won't have to worry about it and the train was packed so I sat in a two seat I spread my books out and said to God I'm not talking to anyone I'm doing my homework because I'm a talker naturally a really elderly blind man gets on the train and someone who's just helping him on says to me can you move your books please at which point I'm really irritated and I shove all my books up the corner and this man sits down next to me and I say again to God

[19 : 35] I'm not talking to him I'm doing my homework so I get my Greek sentences out read the first one and I think oh I know what that means write it down move on to the second one I think oh I know what that one means write it down move on to the second one and I just fly through all ten sentences and I think there's absolutely no way I of my own ability know what these mean it's God so I take the hint I repent of my irritability and finish my sentences and say just start up a conversation with this gentleman next to me we spend two hours talking about war and politics and religion and every five minutes he tells me he's an atheist he's chairman of the atheist party chairman of the humanist party and that there isn't a God but talks also about his Quaker friend his Catholic priest friend and he's got a whole litany of believing friends and towards the end of the journey he says

I know there isn't a God because if there was he would have allowed me to believe in him so I say do you know what Ron the Bible says that if anyone would come to God he must first believe that he exists and you by your own admission keep saying he doesn't exist so maybe you just need to ask him are you there and he begins to weep a gentleman in his 90s blind weeping and he says yes I can see that now so I said can I pray with you Ron yes I'd like that very much he said and he lets me pray with him and he gets off at Reading crying I get off in London crying and I will never see that gentleman again but I know that was a transforming encounter for both of us for him to hear the good news and to be encouraged in his own journey with

God for me to know that when God wants me to do something he makes it possible if we just will give him our yes so as we close today be encouraged when you have opportunity to encounter someone that is going to be transforming for them and allow the Holy Spirit to bring people into your life in a way that will transform you to