



**Acts 8.26-40**  
**John 15.1-8**  
**28<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

## **Baptism lasts and day, discipleship a lifetime**

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Introduction to the Theme: A Trip down Memory Lane

We recently spent a few days in Kent and Sussex. In Kent we visited the villages of relatives we never knew and who are no longer alive, but who we'd been introduced to through the Ancestry programme on our computer and in Sussex we enjoyed an 85<sup>th</sup> birthday lunch with a much-loved uncle. It was great to be in oast house country once again and it brought back some student memories along the way.

Because whilst at theological college I was on training placement in Sevenoaks at The Vine Baptist Church. It was an unusual and charming name for this congregation and perhaps it won't surprise you to know that the church's youth group was called *Grapes*.

I have a much-cherished memory of a summer Sunday at The Vine when, during an evening service, some six young people from *Grapes* were baptised. It was a service filled with such sincerity and celebration I remember walking back through Sevenoaks to the Manse to have coffee with the minister before returning to London, and I felt so fortunate to have been part of this very special occasion.

Well, in a strange way, two of the set readings for today blend the memories of that evening service together.

One is the baptism of the Ethiopian official and the other is the image of the Vine used by Jesus the teacher.

One speaks to us of meeting God's love, the other of growing in God's love.

So, in today's sermon in a few moments time we are going to be thinking of these two events and, still in memory lane mode, we'll be doing so considering a phrase one of my favourite college lecturers often used. He used to say: *Baptism lasts a day, discipleship a lifetime*.

Let's see if today's readings can help us unpack what he might have meant.

**Sermon: Baptism and Discipleship**

*Gracious God, we open the bible and long to receive your word.  
Open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all  
its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*

So, what was that pithy phrase again: *Baptism lasts and day, discipleship a lifetime.*

Let's start with the baptism. There are just a handful of baptisms in the Christian scriptures. We have accounts of Lydia's and the Philippian jailors, and here in Acts 8 we have one that just about breaks every convention which today would surround a service of Believer's Baptism, for there was no congregation there to be part of the candidate's witness and certainly no preparation classes beforehand! Yet as one commentator I read puts it: *this was a moment to put cautious rationality on the shelf and follow an unrestrained God into the world.*

In Bible times eunuchs were often marginalised in their society. Ironically, although they were often excluded, through ill-informed prejudice, from social settings, they were regularly to be found in the ancient world's equivalent of the Civil Service. And that seems to be the case in Ethiopia where the subject of today's reading from Acts exercised considerable power as the Queen's finance minister.

He's a court official and has travelled to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. Now read it like that and it doesn't sound a big deal. But it was a massive undertaking.

To go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this Ethiopian probably took five months. It's a 1500-mile journey one way. A chariot does about 20 miles a day, do the maths and that works out at 150 days travelling. (I realised I've lost a few of you now as you mentally compute the figures!)

So, if there's one thing we can say about this Ethiopian finance minister, he was a serious seeker after truth.

We encounter him reading out loud, that was the norm in those days, you never read silently. He's rich enough to have a scroll of the writings of Isaiah and yet he's puzzled by what it says.

Prompted by The Spirit, Philip comes alongside him and together they talk through this imagery of a sheep going to slaughter as it paints a picture of the sacrificial, generous, and overflowing love of God towards us.

The Ethiopian is so moved by Philip's explanation that he requests baptism in what seems to be a desert oasis. And then the narrative ends as quickly as it began.

The Acts of the Apostles is a book full of these Spirit led encounters from the early days of the Church. Moments of discovery, yet this one, in a way, was in the wrong place.

For surely our Ethiopian seeker after truth had taken this five-month sabbatical from his court duties because he expected to discover God in Jerusalem's Temple. That would naturally have been the place where he anticipated any encounter with the divine to happen.

Yet, it appears, it didn't. We meet him on the way home, just as puzzled as he was on his journey up to Jerusalem.

Maybe it's frustrating for the planners amongst us, yet the wonderful truth is that God surprises us by meeting us in the most unexpected of places at unscheduled moments. We'd love to think such divine encounters were guaranteed every Sunday at 10.30am, but they are, of course, just as likely on Mondays at 10.30am.

We can meet with love, we can experience the touch of transcendence, we can feel profound thanksgiving anywhere at any time. God is not to be boxed in. Remember those wise words of the commentator I read: *this was a moment to put cautious rationality on the shelf and follow an unrestrained God into the world.*

Our first story today is about baptism and meeting God.

Now our second is about The Vine and growing in God.

This is one of the famous I AM sayings of our Lord: *I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in me and bear much fruit.*

For the writer of the fourth gospel salvation is to be thought of in relational terms. It's heart as well as head spirituality and that's why it's described as a sort of dwelling or abiding in God.

This picture of a vine was already in common usage in Jesus' day. The nation was often described as God's vine in the Jewish scriptures. In what's sometimes termed as *Replacement Theology* the gospel writer now pictures Jesus as the vine.

It's worth noting here, however, that whilst we often read these parts of the New Testament with this *replacement* lens, that wasn't necessarily what Jesus was saying. It's more likely that what we have here is yet another example of a division within Judaism at the time of Jesus. In his day there was a gulf between north and south. In the south, the Judaeans laid great emphasis on ritual and hierarchy, perhaps naturally so simply because that's where the Temple was located. Yet in the north, the Galilean Jews – and Jesus might well have been in that tradition, were more radical and put a greater emphasis on the inclusivity of all rather than the superiority of some.

Jesus challenges this gulf in his teachings because he longs for the faith that has nurtured him to be more attuned to the prophetic, rather than the priestly, traditions of Judaism. He really is a more northern believer than a southern one!

Well, the Vine was such a popular image that it even figured on the coins of the Maccabees. And the Jerusalem temple had a huge golden vine sculptured onto the doorway of the Holy of Holies. Wealthy people were glad to give gold towards it so that new leaves or bunches of grapes could be added to it.

Ironically, however, this imagery of a vine in the Jewish scriptures was often one of horticultural mess rather than success. It usually described an overgrown, unattended, or malnourished vine. In other words, it was essentially an image of rebuke about a nation that wasn't listening or honouring God, and so the vine had withered.

Against that background, Jesus calls for his followers to be branches that abide in God's love, that draw constant inspiration from that love and then go on to produce the fruit of God's love.

This was a picture of nourishment that wasn't top down, like the bestowal of authority from a powerful deity. Instead, this organic image is of a vine deeply rooted in the soil, growing year by year with new branches connected. It's a picture of us abiding in God's love, being deeply rooted in God's wholeness and peace, and bearing the fruit of kindness.

Bearing fruit is such a central part of this passage. There simply is no room for faith to become purely private. That's not the purpose of faith, of abiding in the vine. It's not pietistic but practical. Faith goes somewhere: it serves, it reaches out in compassion, and it honours neighbour. We are called to abide in the vine and in doing so we naturally bear good fruit.

It's a beautiful picture about where we find our strength, our meaning, and our purpose.

It's still Easter, because Christians celebrate the concept of resurrection not as a day but a season.

Lent is a mere 40-day season. Easter is a fifty day one lasting until Pentecost. And in this season, we have today these two readings.

We have a baptism, as the Ethiopian official has his own encounter with the risen Christ. Maybe it was an historic one that changed the world. For today there are 50 million Christians in Ethiopia and tradition has it that they owe their Church's origins to a seeker after truth who took a 5-month sabbatical to Jerusalem and who somehow met the love of God on the journey home.

And the second reading? All about organic Christianity and the way we grow in God's love by being rooted in the life of the resurrected Jesus. And we then produce a life of compassion, service and kindness.

And that's a constant calling, a permanent abiding, because in the words of my college lecturer: *Baptism is for a day, discipleship for a lifetime.*

May it be so in the name of God who both calls us to, and nurtures us in, his resurrection life. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 26th April 2024*