# Some other Baptism

**A reflection on Acts 8: 26 – 40**
**By Reverend Rob Wardle**

Our Acts reading – is part of the 'Acts of the Apostles' – what the first followers of Jesus did, their stories, their encounters, the people they converted – like this Ethiopian Eunoch. I sometimes wonder, maybe like you, what sort of stories and what 'STORY' our bible would tell – if had continued to be written. The timeline stops doesn't it – at maybe around 100CE or a hundred years after Jesus. What stories would it contain? Imagine, if people had kept on writing, how thick the book would now be. But what stories would it contain.

Would there be stories of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, the spread of Christianity to almost every corner of the planet - from the tiny place called Jerusalem. And would there be stories, of Church shrinkage, of Christianity waning and becoming less observed in the world. What stories would be in there? I would suggest the stories would primarily be about faithfulness. Through triumph and adversity, faithfulness(with all its ups and downs) is the bright thread which is woven through the stories of the bible. And this is our story, the story of this place, Bro Cybi. Faithfulness mean living out the life story of Jesus of Nazareth – the life story of healing the sick, comforting the broken hearted, speaking out against oppression and injustice; living a resurrection life of hope, thankfulness, hospitality and generosity.

I like storytelling. Someone once said – that stories tell more about the storyteller, than they do about what actually happened. So here's a story – about another baptism.

"Love you" he says, every "I love you and I'll call you later eh, bye Rob". That's how he ends the call, every time, for the last fifteen years.
We began eighteen or maybe nineteen years ago, it doesn't matter really. I was working in someone's garden together with other people from the Church. We were cleaning up someone's garden, a family who were having a hard time in the community. Youths had been tormenting them, threatening them in the street, shouting obscenities through their letterbox, putting unmentionable things on their doorstep and generally being very, very

unpleasant. They were a ‘different’ sort of family who didn’t fit in and they had asked us for help.

A young man rode up on a BMX bike, it was far too small for him. He was tall, swanky, lanky and gobby; full of youthful cheek. He had a tracksuit on, a clean smart one, with new trainers, short hair and a boyish face. He was a Scally and he was happy to be. “What are you doin’ CS?” he shouted, half laughing. CS was community service, a sentence dished out to make people pay something back to the community. It was standard to be mocked if you were on CS. The cool thing was not to turn up for your CS or better still, to get a fine which you didn’t pay and what are they going to do ? Just give you more CS. “No” I said, we’re from the Church, just helping out. Naively, I thought maybe he would see us as something good, maybe even something which might be a life changer for him.

The woman in the house, the mother, started screaming, at him “I’ll call the police” “I’ll call the police”. You’re not supposed to be here, you’re not allowed on the street. “What” he sneared, I’m doing anythin’, I’m just here, “Look I’m not doin’ anything”. “Get away” she yelled, with hysterical fear in her shouts and screams. How can anyone be this frightened of this young man I thought? There was terror in her voice. Something really bad hasd happened here. She was already on the phone. He hung around riding away then coming back, his mates started to appear across the street, egging him on: “Go in Ant hahahah”. He duly smiled at them and turned back to look at us. “Mad innit? I’m only standin ‘ere, I’m not doin’ anythin’ there’s no law against that”. He was enjoying the spectacle. It was mischief, he didn’t care, it was fun. He had no fear, he thought nothing of the terror he was inflicting on this woman and her children. She was just…well… lower than him and he was enjoying his power – to be at the centre of attention.

And so he was, a few months later he was given the first ASBO in our neighbourhood. This new ‘tool’ which it was said – would change out difficult neighbourhood. To shame the young offenders who were vandalising and terrorising our otherwise law abiding citizens.

His photo appeared on the front page of the newspaper, I still have it. “Named and shamed” – as if nobody knew who he was. Lets finish the job – the heading said. Meaning that his ASBO would once and for all rid the community of this young criminal.

He loved it – the badge of honour – the first ASBO in town. It did nothing to curb his behaviour, but it did put him in a young offenders institution again – for ‘defaulting’.

When they offered me a council house, it was right across the road form where he lived – with his drug dealing father, addict mum and various siblings, all from different fathers. And they were a proud family – if you met mum pushing the pram in the street you would think everything was fine, just the usual problems, a slightly deliquent son “ I can’t do anything with him, he’s beyond me” she would say “he’s not that bad though really”. He kept on growing; he kept growing a lot. He became tall and strong and he learned how to use his fists. He was friends with my next door neighbour’s son and as a youth worker I got on with him ok, I liked his character actually, his cheek, he was funny when he wasn’t being bad. And there was something else about him – and I couldn’ tput my finger on what it was.

I ended up doing some work with him, for the Youth Offending Service. And then one night I saw a police car across the road outside his house. I watched through the blinds as he was brought out, in handcuffs, this tall smart lad, looking vulnerable for once, they put him in the back seat. I lit a candle as they drove away; that was the first time I prayed for him.

He was in and out of prison, I ended up as his informal mentor, I’d go to court, say what I thought. Things got worse, he got older, became more violent, started drinking, started being ‘used’ by the dealers – because he was big and strong, he was happy to earn the money. And then he stabbed someone, two knives into the belly one from each side. I went to see him in jail, I’d always gone to see him in jail. I would take him books, which he never read. I would talk about Jesus but not for long, because he looked away as soon as I tried to talk about hope – and a new life. He wasn’t interested.

And then last week, he phoned and it was a different call. After fourteen years in jail and all the visits and phone calls, with not very much talk about Jesus(but he always asked me how things were going at Church)he said he wanted me to send him a bible, that he had been talking to the chaplain and that he wanted to become a Christian.

Some of us are uncomfortable about ‘evangelism’, we don’t even like the word. Perhaps the word we should have in our minds is ‘faithfulness’. Because that, above all is what we are called to be and to do. To live faith-fully and to never give up. Those were the acts of the apostles and these will continue to be – the acts of Jesus apostles; his followers.