

27 April 2018

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)

Easter 4

© Neil Millar

Well, we come to the last sermon in our little series on community, and whilst I shall not try to emulate our beloved leader and preacher in this address, I am excited to engage with this wonderful story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. It's a passage that came alive for me a number of years ago thanks to exegetical insights from OT scholar Matthew Anstey (a colleague at St Mark's when I taught there). In many ways, this chapter marks part of a turning point in the life of the early church.

As we've heard in Sarah's previous addresses, the early chapters of Acts tell the story of those first weeks after Easter and Pentecost. The fearful disciples have been transformed into joy-filled, vital community. There have been bold acts of preaching and hospitality, the community is blooming. But until now it's been mostly centripetal growth (people coming in and joining that central group in Jerusalem). Things are changing though. Stephen has been stoned. Persecution is breaking out and the church is being scattered. Far from hindering the unfolding, however, this merely serves to spread the movement. Philip, one of the seven chosen to 'wait on tables' in Jerusalem, discovers a preaching gift and finds himself in demand in Samaria. As we pick up the story in this reading, he's just been given a new assignment – a prompting from the Spirit to head south on the Gaza road.

Now, this directive is both clear and vague. He knows *where* to go, the Gaza road. But as to *why*, he has no clue. What's behind this prompting? Especially when you think of where it is he's being sent. The Gaza road is a wilderness track. This is backblocks country; surely there are more important places for Philip to be. What's going on? Well, if Philip was wondering about any of this, we're not told. Apparently, he just up and went. Such was his conviction. It strikes me as a bold move. And it continues in this vein.

Philip sees a man in a chariot, a foreigner from Ethiopia – an important court official to Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. He is, we're told, a eunuch, and that's important for our understanding of this story. A eunuch is a boy, who, before puberty, has had, *at the least*, his testicles removed. You can imagine how humiliating and dangerous this operation would have been. Many did not survive. But think of the implications of this cruel procedure. The castration means that his body won't produce testosterone and so his voice won't break. He won't have much body hair or muscle mass, and because testosterone stops men's bones from growing too long most eunuchs also had long limbs and often suffered from obesity. In a word, these people were disfigured, they looked and sounded strange, they were social outcasts, forced to live alone and in a kind of liminal space. The word eunuch means 'bed keeper'. Eunuchs often had responsibility to care for the women of the royal family. They knew how to be discrete, and, of course, they were no 'threat' if you get what I mean.

The interesting thing about this man was that he had been to Jerusalem to worship God and was returning home. How did this happen? What had drawn this man to the Jewish faith? Drawn him deeply enough to be making a journey to temple to worship, deeply enough to be reading from the Jewish scriptures on his way home. Whatever it was, we know this man was on a spiritual journey (literally and metaphorically).

So, here we are in the wilderness with a Jewish proselyte travelling along in his chariot, and Philip, the responsive disciple, drawing alongside (again, at the prompting of the Spirit). [Notice the initiative of God in this story – working in Philip, working in the eunuch]. Philip runs up to the chariot and hears the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah. After some time, he asks him: *‘Do you understand what you’re reading?’* Notice that, a question. [Not, how about I *tell* you what this means ‘cause I’m on the inside of this and you’re not]. He doesn’t shove a brochure in the eunuch’s face or make any assumptions; he doesn’t barge his way into the chariot and preach. Tactics we’ve too often seen from the earnest Christian evangelist. No, he draws alongside, and he listens; he respects the man. And then he asks: *‘Do you understand what you are reading?’*

I love this story. It’s so hospitable. When it comes to mission, it seems, God’s way is to come alongside, respectfully, and to listen. And, then after listening, comes inquiry... *service*: Can I help you? *‘Do you understand what you are reading?’*

Well, the eunuch replies with a question of his: *‘How can I understand unless someone guides me?’* Philip’s open-ended, respectful approach engenders conversation, not bible bashing, or threatened responses, a conversation ... dialogue ... genuine sharing ... And, as so often happens with genuine conversation, barriers come down and bridges are built. [I think of that wonderful scene on the Korean border this week as the leaders from north and south began a conversation, and barriers started to come down – long may it continue. Trump, take note!!] This is a better way to go. This is God’s way, the way of conversation.

And, then, *the eunuch* invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. There you go; hospitality opening up the possibility of community. I love what it suggests about mission. From the beginning, Philip respects the integrity of eunuch’s journey. He meets this man where *he* is. He doesn’t demand anything, rather he joins him on *his* journey in *his* space; listens to *his* questions, responds to *his* timing.

And so we come to the text that the eunuch is reading, a text that has him baffled. Isaiah 53:7–8:

*He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.*

There’s an irony here, isn’t there. The eunuch is reading about a man who suffered terribly, a man who was humiliated, denied justice – a man with no descendants. When you think

about it; a man just like *him*. The likeness is not lost on the eunuch, and so he asks: *Who was the prophet talking about? Does he say this about himself or someone else? Who could it be, this person I so identify with? Surely not a god! Gods are untouchable; gods smite, gods don't get slaughtered? Who was he talking about?*

And starting with *this* scripture, *this* question, Philip shares the news that has so recently transformed his own life. News of Jesus *the* lamb who was slain – the God who suffered and died *and has been raised*. And, for the eunuch it was indeed good news, for here was a God who knew his situation from the 'inside', a God who identified with him and *with whom he could identify*. When you see it in this light, it's not surprising that the eunuch was so responsive. 'Look,' he says, 'here's some water! What's to stop me from being baptized?' He orders the chariot to stop, and there and then the baptism takes place. Philip is promptly snatched away and the eunuch continues on his way rejoicing. And, thus the story ends, although, of course it doesn't, because the eunuch went home and shared his and the community continued to grow and spread. And so it goes, until the present day.

Some concluding reflections

1. I've already mentioned the place of hospitality in this missional encounter – the importance of respecting the other and the integrity of their journey.

The integrity of the eunuch's journey is respected from beginning to end. Not just his physical journey on that road (which never deviates), but also his spiritual journey. The Spirit sends Philip, Philip responds, he's the one who changes course. And he keeps adjusting. He comes alongside the moving chariot and, when invited, enters *his* chariot, listens to *his* story, reads *his* texts, answers *his* questions, baptizes at *his* request. There is deep respect on the part of Philip and it has a profound impact. So, that is missing in Christian mission. So, often it comes from a superior and patronising place often an awkward place, and so often it is rejected. The story points to the importance in mission of respecting the integrity of another's journey.

2. And then there's the delightful non-anxiousness of it all.

Philip gets this strange prompting. But he doesn't stress, it seems, he goes along with it—stays open and available. When he sees the opportunity, he doesn't grasp it or force it, he waits for it to unfold. And, when he is whisked away, he doesn't stress about what will become of the eunuch (not as far as we can tell). He leaves it to God, who was clearly at work *before* Philip came along, and who clearly continued working afterwards. Philip could only accompany him so far, but that's okay, because the Spirit continued, and the Spirit is quite capable of doing whatever she will (as I'm sure we will discover in the coming weeks, when we hear more of our own stories of call and response).

I see a great deal of anxiety in the church at present. Worrying about our future, our loss of market-share. This story suggests it is unnecessary, for the Spirit is present, and 'where the spirit is, there is life'! Our role is not to *make it happen*, our role is to be attentive to *what's already happening*, and to how we can participate when invited. I see no anxiety in this story, despite the uncondusive circumstances—the persecution,

the scattering, the unlikeliness of a deserted road. It all happens without a fuss, and presumably it still can.

3. Finally, a word about belonging to this community.

Who's welcome? Who do they have to be, what do they have to do to belong to this new church? Well, it seems, anyone is welcome. If you're on the journey and you're up for the adventure, then you're in! '*Look, here's some water. What's to prevent me from being baptised?*' Well, actually, Mr Eunuch, can we be sure of your doctrinal purity, are you the right colour, what about your gender (there's a tricky one) how can we be sure of that. Have you paid your dues? Do you know enough? Are you prepared to abide by the rules?

No. There is *nothing* to prevent you. If *you're* in, you're *in*! Come on, let's do it ... *And, both of them went down into the water; and Philip baptised him.* There was nothing to stop him belonging to *God's* story because *God already belonged to his.* Long before *he* was sent like a lamb to the slaughter, *the lamb of God* had already gone ... And in this humble act of divine solidarity new life, new possibility, new hospitality is always being extended. Which is why in a few minutes, we're going to meditate and just *be* in the stream of it. No need to force anything. No need to worry. Nothing to prevent us belonging (except ourselves)...