

1 May 2021

What is to Prevent Me? (Acts 8. 26-40)

© Sarah Bachelard

Every year, in the season of Easter, the church seeks to communicate the meaning of Jesus' resurrection by reading primarily from two New Testament books – the gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles. These two texts have a strikingly different feel.

Once we get past the appearance narratives, the passages we read from John's gospel purport to be Jesus' words to his disciples before his death – his attempt to say who he really is, what his life is about, and what this means for how *they* are now to live. John says explicitly that the disciples aren't going to understand any of it until later, until after the resurrection. Because it's only as they look back, that the disciples will understand how Jesus has been speaking all along out of a radical union with the One he calls 'Father', and seeking to draw them into this same communion through their relationship with him. 'I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father' (John 10.14-15). 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture' (John 10.9). 'I am the vine ... Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit' (John 15.5). And so on. John's gospel is written from a perspective that sees things whole and anticipates their fulfilment. There's something very settled and peaceable about these discourses – divine-human union already realised.

By contrast, the stories we hear from the Acts of the Apostles feel much more unsettled – even at times chaotic. This text depicts the experience of Jesus' followers left behind in the social and religious mess he precipitated, trying to figure out what on earth just happened. They've undergone the trauma of Jesus' trial and execution, at least some of them have had a personal encounter with him alive on the other side of death, and now they're finding themselves infused with a strange new energy and power – the self-same Spirit of God that animated Jesus.

In a process of radical transition, they seem continuously amazed and knocked off balance, prompted to act in all kinds of unexpected ways. They don't yet have that birds' eye, Johannine perspective that gives them a grasp of the whole. It's more as if they're being led to discover the contours and shape of a new form of life from the inside out. They're making meaning as they go, learning the dynamics of their new theology and community by trial and error, by butting up against their hesitations and preconceptions and limits, and then finding themselves drawn beyond. If John's gospel offers something like the beatific vision – the peace and rest of God achieved, Acts portrays the messy, human process of learning to recognise this vision as a possibility and of discovering *how* to live it. One way of reading this text, then, is to look for how the different stories reveal what the community of disciples is being called to learn next about God and about themselves.

The encounter of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch comes at a key juncture in the life of the embryonic Christian community. Till now, according to Acts, the disciples have been concentrated in the city of Jerusalem, proclaiming the message of Jesus' resurrection to their 'fellow Israelites' (Acts 2.29). The community is blooming, growing exponentially, but this has attracted the increasingly organised hostility of the religious authorities. Stephen has just been stoned to death for blasphemy, and 'a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem'. Says Acts, 'all except the apostles were scattered through the countryside of Judea and Samaria' (8. 1). Philip is one of those scattered. He's gone first to preach in the city of Samaria, but as we pick up his story, he's just been given a new assignment – a prompting from an angel of the Lord to head south on the Gaza road.

If we look at what follows through the lens I suggested – as a story that carries an important learning for the early Christian community – then what do we notice? What strikes me, to begin, is that the man Philip is led by the Spirit to meet is, at many levels, a liminal figure. An Ethiopian, he's ethnically not Israelite, not a 'son of Abraham', and yet he's a believer, a Jewish proselyte, who has come all the way to Jerusalem to worship Israel's God. Religiously, then, a liminal figure – somewhere

between a Gentile and a Jew. He's an immensely powerful man – an official in the court of the queen of the Ethiopians, 'in charge' says the text 'of her entire treasury', and yet he's a servant who lacks real social status. In the ancient world, eunuchs were usually slaves who had been castrated to render them 'safer' as intimates of the royal court. They were trusted to be 'bed keepers' of the women of the family, or to occupy high office, since they lacked the family ties that could motivate private, dynastic ambition. Socially, then, a liminal figure – powerful and yet ultimately little more than a functionary.

And with regard to gender and sexuality – well, also a liminal figure. According to Jewish law as laid down in the book of Deuteronomy, 'no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord' (Deut, 23.1). Yet in this story from Acts, the very Spirit of God tells Philip to 'Go over to this eunuch's chariot and join it'. The easy moral we could draw is that, while the 'law' (the supposedly bad, exclusivist tradition of Israel) doesn't make space for such liminal kinds of people, the 'gospel' (the supposedly nice, inclusivist tradition of Christianity) welcomes and involves them. In fact, however, it's not quite that simple.

Our Ethiopian friend, we're told, is reading the prophet Isaiah. We know which verses, and only a little further on from the passage cited, Isaiah says this: 'Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree"'. For thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off"'. According to Isaiah, then, faithful eunuchs are welcomed by God – and foreigners too. Even before Philip shows up, (presuming he's read that far), this Ethiopian eunuch has been assured that he's OK with God. In fact, everything that's been denied him – a name, a future, belonging – all this is available because the Lord, says Isaiah, 'gathers the outcasts of Israel'.

So what does Philip have to add to that? And what might Philip be learning through this encounter? Well, I guess it's likely that Isaiah's vision of hospitality to the outsider wasn't perfectly enacted in Israel's practice – much as the Christian vision of radical hospitality isn't always perfectly enacted by the church. Philip is perhaps being assured that God is with Isaiah rather than Deuteronomy in a case such as this. But I wonder if there's something more. The text that's puzzling the eunuch speaks of God's suffering servant: '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' (Isa. 53. 7-8).

The eunuch is reading about someone who suffered violence, mutilation; who was humiliated, a man without descendants. When you think about it; a man just like him. And he asks: Who is the prophet talking about? Does he say this about himself or someone else? Who could it be, this person with whom I so identify? Starting with this Scripture, Philip shares the news that has so recently transformed his own life – the understanding that it was God's own Son, in the person of Jesus, who had undergone this suffering, and died, and been raised. And for the eunuch, this offers not just a vision of a God who might tolerate him, allow him to join in the community of the faithful; this is a God who knows his difficult situation from the 'inside', a God who identifies with him wholly, who has come *for* him and wants to be *with* him.

It's not surprising then, that the eunuch wants a piece of it. 'Look,' he says, 'here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' From becoming a follower of Christ, entrusting myself to wholly to this love, being immersed in this grace, this truth. Could it be that *this* is the question the early church needed to hear at the very beginning of its missionary outreach? What is to prevent me? Me – someone who finds themselves at the edge of every social category, neither Jew nor Gentile, rich nor poor, male nor female, neither powerful nor powerless. What is in the way of me accessing the fullness of God, the fullness of myself, despite all my intersecting marginalities? And Philip's answer? Nothing. Nothing is in the way.

Nothing is required to qualify. Nothing is to prevent you from becoming one with God and one with us.

I hear in the eunuch's question and Philip's response echoes of St Paul's words in his letter to the Romans: 'if God is for us, who is against us? ... Who will bring any charge against those God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of God?' (Rom. 8. 31-34). Brian Maclaren beautifully depicts what this means: 'As Philip and the [newly baptised] Ethiopian disciple climb the stream bank, they represent a new humanity emerging from the water, dripping wet and full of joy, marked by a new and radical reconciliation in the kingdom of God'.¹ For God has come and become you; so that you might come and become one with God.

¹ From *A New Kind of Christianity* (pp.182-183), cited in Girard Lectionary, <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-b/easter5b/> (accessed 30 April 2021).