

Philip & the Ethiopian Stranger Sermon on Acts 8:26-40

The Bible is a familiar book in this place. Many of us have been reading it for a lifetime and longer. Yet, the Bible is full of forgotten surprises.

The story which we used as an all-age story is coming again to us as the sermon text.

Because of the name of our new church we come across a peculiar little story: the story of 'Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch'. This is a little known and often ignored passage. Not one that was talked of often in the Sunday School classes of my youth. I suppose that the teachers must have feared the inevitable question: "What's a eunuch?"

Fair enough – and we'll get to that later. 😊

First, let us all draw our attention to the story of the name giver of this church.

A graphic of him can be seen on the lectern, and there are many Philips as art decoration on the outside church wall...

The story of 'Philip meeting the Ethiopian Eunuch' comes at a crucial turning point in the life of the young church. In these early chapters of the Book of Acts the word 'Christian' is as yet unknown. These early followers call themselves people of 'The Way'. They are living in a new way, following in the footsteps of the risen Christ, who is leading them to love one another beyond all the accepted norms and bounds. The early chapters of the Book of Acts portray a community in which the holy spirit of God is moving in powerful ways to create a people who share all they have with one another. Now, with the story of Philip and the Ethiopian stranger the holy spirit of God begins to open the people of 'The Way' to others in an extraordinary manner.

Up to this point, the community has continued Jesus' ministry among their own kind. Now things begin to change. Here in chapter eight Philip meets an African. In chapter nine Saul is converted on the road to Damascus and becomes Paul, a missionary whose life's work will be to invite non-Jews into the community of 'The Way'. And then, in the tenth chapter, Peter's absolute refusal to meet 'outsiders' will be overcome as the holy spirit confronts him with the Roman named Cornelius.

Do you see what is happening here? A people who have been focussed on themselves are becoming extroverted. They have been turned inward, first in fear and then in wonder. In the beginning they doubt that their tiny number can survive. But then they begin to see the holy spirit moving among them in

power. They discover a powerful and radical love at work in their life together. Little do they realize, however, what God has in store for them. They cannot know just how far God's spirit will go in turning their life, as a people, inside out.

It starts with an angel meeting Philip, saying: "Get up and head over to that lonely road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza". Mysteriously, Philip is directed to a chariot on that ancient road. In it he finds an Ethiopian eunuch. We do not know his name.

We only know his race and his gender.

He is an African who has been 'neutralized'. He no longer has sexual power, and in a patriarchal world is therefore no longer regarded a male competitor who needs to be taken seriously. A perfect servant to a rich queen.

So much we know. And we know something else about this stranger: that he is on his way home from a trip to Jerusalem. His has not been a state visit.

Instead, he has come to the temple to worship the God of the Jewish people. He has come seeking. But he has quickly learned that he can never belong.

The ancient law of God is clear. The first verse of the twenty-third chapter of Deuteronomy explicitly bans eunuchs from the community. There is no welcome for him in the temple. His destiny seems to be an outsider everywhere.

But back to Philip: he finds himself meeting an outcast, an outsider who is studying the scroll of Isaiah as he makes his way home to Africa. "Do you understand what you are reading?" asks Philip.

"How can I, unless someone guides me?" answers the Ethiopian traveller. As it happens, he is reading from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah: "In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

One suspects that our Ethiopian stranger who himself has known humiliation and who has been denied the justice of full humanity and who is looking for something that we might call the fullness of life, has a special interest in this particular passage.

He has discovered this story about God's chosen servant coming as one who is cut off and rejected by God's own people. He may wonder what this can mean for himself who now finds himself to be cut off and rejected.

"Then", as the story says, "Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus". It must have been quite a conversation. But just what precisely does Philip say about Jesus? How does he phrase this good news?

Whatever Philip says seems to work. The next thing we know is that the Ethiopian stranger spots water by the side of the road, stops the chariot and convinces Philip to baptise him on the spot. And all of a sudden the young church includes in its number an outcast stranger seeking life.

So what is it that Philip says?

The text gives us a hint.

“Starting with this scripture”, it says. Starting with Isaiah fifty-three... - what is it the two in this chariot read?

They only have this Isaiah scroll.

So let’s look what happens when one begins at Isaiah chapter fifty-three and continues on, as Philip does with his Ethiopian host.

They read this large Isaiah scroll. And if they start with chapter 53, then they may have soon read chapters fifty-four, fifty-five and fifty-six.

And now listen to what Philip and the Ethiopian read as they ride along together:

**“Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child;
burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour ...
Enlarge the place of your tent,
stretch your curtains wide, do not hold back;
lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.
For you will spread out to the right and to the left ...”** Isaiah 54

The promise of fertility and of a future is spoken to those who have no hope of a child. But there is more. Isaiah continues:

**“Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters,
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”** Isaiah 55

Suddenly the invitation to receive refreshment is not limited to those who can pay the price, whose righteous lives are somehow worthy of God’s tender mercies. Here the invitation is to all who thirst. Surely, though, Philip’s newfound acquaintance is wondering if this invitation can possibly include thirsty foreigners ... and thirsty eunuchs. Imagine his surprise as Isaiah goes on:

**“Let not any foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say,
‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’
And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree’.
For this is what the Lord says:**

**‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose me and hold fast to my covenant -
to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.’** Isaiah 56

Starting with these scriptures Philip proclaims the good news about Jesus. We don't know exactly the words he uses. But we do know what he believes and shares. He must somehow tell the Ethiopian what we, too, have been told: He announces the incredibly good news that the time has come when Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled.

The time of exclusion is over.

The time for foreigners and outcasts, Ethiopians and eunuchs to be welcomed into the family of God has arrived.

God's chosen servant, Jesus, was himself cut off and rejected by God's own people.

But, by the power of God, he has become the one in whom God's promise to bless the earth and its peoples is being kept.

He invites all peoples to live the radically new life of loving our neighbours that God intends for all peoples, everywhere.

Opportunities as Philip has in our story are all around us. Sometimes we let them pass unnoticed. But I believe if we opened our ears to the voice of God more profoundly we could hear God inviting us, saying: "Go out ... and catch up to the stranger on the road who has come seeking ... and who has been excluded ... who has not been welcomed into the family of God. Go and sit with her, read the scripture with him ... open my community to them."

And we'd probably tend to say: "But ... but ... we include a warm welcome in our Sunday bulletin and try our best to say hello over coffee after church. Or: But we are new ourselves... how...".

In truth, everything changes once a community is turned inside out so that its members look first to the other, to the stranger, to the outsider.

God had major changes in mind for the church.

Just look at Philip, and Paul, and Peter, and Lydia of course and Tabitha in the Book of Acts.

They discover to their great surprise that God wants an out-turned people, whose eyes and ears and arms are open to the stranger... unafraid to welcome any and all who have been somehow cut off by the world.

It is not hard to think of those who have been cut off from the source of life or the fullness of life.

They are the strangers who come here and seek a better life. They are the ones who lost their homes, fled their home countries seeking justice and peace. They are the ones without apartments or sufficient social support. They are the ones separated from their families. They are the ones who speak the language of this country not well enough to understand all the rules and habits of everyday life. They are the ones who are shy, who feel unable to communicate, sensing rejection and fear of the stranger. They are the ones with a deep and genuine desire to belong.

They are the ones whose lives dry up for lack of love. They are the ones whose fear makes them go crazy.

Many are cast out or feel cast out for many reasons...

And they come, as the Ethiopian stranger somehow did in the story, standing at the door step of our Christian community, wondering if there is love here for them ... here in Philippuskirche?

...if there is God here for them.

And what do they find?

They find us...

...who try to be Philips, sharing God's love with all who come, because we know so well what it means to be new, foreign, a stranger, even an outcast...

We have experienced both: to be made happy by the good news of neighbour love and to pass these on to make others happy.

Amen.