

## **Who is being converted?**

### *A meditation on Acts 8:26-40*

Have you ever been on a long journey which turned out to be entirely in vain? I have on a number of occasions.

One such occasion was when I had freshly moved to Munich and wanted to prepare for a half-marathon. I was looking for a running club and in the end found one that would be meeting at a school gym close to where I used to live. Not wanting to be late, I left work half an hour early and arrived just before the club was going to meet. I rushed into the changing room to change into my running gear, I did my stretches and I then went to the place where people were meant to gather.

Except that they didn't. After about ten minutes, a friendly gentleman appeared. He informed me that the running club was not going to meet thanks to the Bavarian school holidays. He, however, saw my sorry state in being in full sports outfit and kindly suggested that I could join his gymnastics classes for senior citizens. So, instead of going for a vigorous run, I was doing roly polies with the grannies – who appeared to be way more flexible than me!

It must have been a similarly frustrating appearance for the eunuch who is mentioned in the passage that was just read. He travelled all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem on what must have been an extremely exhausting journey. If you check on Google Maps, a trip from the then capital of Ethiopia to Jerusalem would cover about 2400 km and thus must have taken weeks to complete.

Imagine then how the experience of being in Jerusalem must have been. Clearly, being there must have meant a lot for him since otherwise he would not have made that journey. He was probably looking forward to what may well have been a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience. As a passionate traveller, I can imagine what it must have been like for him to be approaching Jerusalem and to be heading to the temple he probably heard so much about.

But here comes a disappointment. Having arrived at the temple, he was only allowed into the forecourt, since eunuchs, as well as foreigners, were not allowed into the inner courts. Yes, they could bring their sacrifices, and yes,

they could pray, but they were not allowed into the inner sanctum. Basically, they were just about tolerated.

If I were that eunuch, I would probably find that experience, for want of a better word, “underwhelming”. You are a second class worshipper, and you are made to feel it, and no matter how much effort you spent on coming to Jerusalem, no matter how long you travelled, you are kept on the fringes – because of who you are, in terms of nationality and in terms of your sexuality. It is a bit like going to a party only to find out that you are welcome to bring a present but won’t be allowed to join.

It is in that framework that the intervention of Philip is remarkable.

At that point, the church is still squabbling about whether it should see itself as just a Jewish sect or whether it should take a broader view. The apostle Paul, who is credited with taking the gospel to the wider world, has not yet been converted. Another leading apostle, Peter, is still more than hesitant to enter the house of a Roman centurion because of Jewish purity laws.

It is in that context that God’s intervention can be clearly seen. The eunuch is a person who is, because of his nationality, and because of his sexuality, very much at the fringe. It is to such a person that Philip is led. And it is just fitting that the eunuch is studying the book of Isaiah. The passage that he read was from Isaiah 53. Just a few chapters later, we find the verses:

*Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say,  
“The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.”  
And let no eunuch complain,  
“I am only a dry tree.”*

The message could not be clearer: no matter what your nationality is, you are not excluded. And maybe there is also a hint that a person’s sexuality and sexual identity does not exclude that person from God’s kingdom.

I could stop here. But I think there is another aspect that we should not overlook, and that is more with the unlikely chain of events that unfolds.

Why did the encounter happen in the desert? Would it not have been much easier for Philip to encounter the eunuch in Jerusalem. It would have been much less travelling. Further, from reliable resources, I have been informed

that water for baptismal purposes is much more easily accessible in Jerusalem than in the desert.

So why did the encounter happen in the desert? Why all that effort?

I think that one reason could have been to drive the message home to Philip, as well as to the rest of the church, that also people on the fringes are part of God's kingdom. Had Philip met the eunuch in Jerusalem, this encounter could have been understood to be by mere chance, and little significance would probably have been given to it by Philip and the wider church. It probably would have been regarded as one encounter among many.

However, the mere chain of unlikely events that the story reports may have been chosen to point out the importance of this one encounter to Philip. Let us just look at the sequence of highly unlikely events that took place according to the story:

- An angel appears to Philip
- Philip encounters a eunuch who has just been to Jerusalem
- The eunuch has a keen interest in theology and reads a passage of a book that can be read onto Jesus
- The eunuch, who is a high ranking civil servant, is open-minded enough to acknowledge his lack of understanding
- There is water for a baptism in the desert
- Philip disappears and suddenly reappears somewhere else

Taking those events at face value, and given this chain of unlikely events, it must have been clear for Philip that the events he was experiencing were of significance. And, clearly, it must have primed him for accepting the fact that foreigners, and people who are at the margins of society, do have their place in God's kingdom.

Maybe in that day and age, the church had to learn to accept people who are outside of its comfort zone so that it could start engaging with them. Maybe the church had to be "converted" to a wider acceptance of people before it could start spreading the gospel?

I wonder what this means for us today? Would, for us today, a similar approach be beneficial?

I think that thanks to the advent of social media like Facebook and Twitter, with their algorithmic newsfeed, it is all too easy to be fed the kind of news that only serve to reinforce your views. If you are a die-hard liberal, you will get a different newsfeed than a Trump supporter. If you are a climate change denier, the news you read will be different from those of a supporter of Fridays for Future. Whatever your beliefs are, they will be reinforced.

What I have personally found is that with that kind of self-reinforcing cycle, it becomes difficult to engage with people who have widely different views. I am in contact with a fair few people who have views I passionately disagree with. What I find is that when those topics we disagree on come up – which they do, invariably – it is just so hard to assume the best intentions. It is so hard to respond in a kind way. It is ever so tempting to “shout back” and write messages all in capitals to state your point. To drive your message home. To stand your ground.

Except that probably, the number of people who have been convinced by a Facebook or a WhatsApp-argument that their point of view is wrong is almost certainly close to zero. Except that, probably, this way of responding is the best way of making sure that you are not heard.

Maybe the best way will be to try to assume the best intentions in those people who cross our paths. Coming back to the story, Philip did not worry about the differences in theological background between the then rather Jewish church and the non-Jewish background of the eunuch. Instead, he focused on the needs of the person he encountered and on the shared interest in scripture. And, whilst this may not be a guaranteed way of really engaging with people of different viewpoints, it is, in my opinion at least, the best way of making sure that everybody is heard.

I pray that, in the week ahead, we would seek to find common ground with people and that we would dare to be changed by people who disagree with us.