

## Easter V

**Acts 8:26–40** Psalm 22:25–31 1 John 4:7–21 John 15:1–8

Last week we focussed on the Gospel and I talked about the imagery of sheep and shepherds. This week I want to focus on the first NT passage that offers an opportunity to talk about topics that are sensitive in church circles, highlighted in today's story of the Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch: Race and sexuality.

The Ethiopia of New Testament times was not where modern Ethiopia is. It was south of Egypt on the Nile River, in the Nubian region of what is now Sudan. In Old Testament times, it was known as the land of Cush.

Being from Ethiopia, the man was probably a black African.

Ethiopian society considered it beneath the king to be involved in day-to-day administration, so the queen or *Candace* became the de facto ruler and *Candace* was a title rather than a proper name.

Being a eunuch means that his testicles were cut off when he was a baby or young boy. As foreign as it sounds to us, it was not uncommon to castrate boys of a certain servant class.

Males were sometimes castrated to prepare them for service in the king's harem or his treasury. The assumption was that a eunuch would be a safe person to serve the king's wives and apparently also less tempted by money than an ordinary man. Certain important jobs in state administration were sometimes reserved for eunuchs.

This man is in charge of the queen's royal treasury, which is a position of trust and power. Although a man of obvious authority and influence in his own country, he is nothing of the sort in Israel. There, he is neither welcomed nor honoured because there are three strikes against him. He is black, and a Gentile, and a eunuch.

So, this royal official is seated in his chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah, returning to Ethiopia after "He had come to Jerusalem to worship". The law recorded in Leviticus denied the right to give offerings to God to anyone who had a blemish and eunuchs are among those specified (Lev 21:17-21). That means he cannot be a convert to Judaism, so he is probably a "God-fearer": One of those who worships the Jewish God. God-fearers were granted access to the Court of the Gentiles but denied access to the rest of the temple.

The outer Court of the Gentiles was the area where we noted, Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers.

As is often the case, the background to the little the text is really interesting. To travel from Ethiopia to Jerusalem by chariot would take the man months. It is a journey of about 2 600 km one way, apparently, probably northwards following the Nile into Egypt and then cutting across north east above the top of the Red Sea to Jerusalem. He must be a man of substantial means to fund a trip like this with a suitable chariot, servants and provisions. Equally, to be reading from a personal copy of Isaiah means he can afford to purchase a hand-copied scroll at considerable cost and is not only literate but can read Greek, not his mother tongue.

The passage from Isaiah 53 verses 7-8 that Luke records here are taken from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament and not the Hebrew.

The question that yells out to me is “Why?” Why would this man make this crazy journey to worship a foreign God in a foreign country when he **knows** that there is every likelihood that he will be barred from even entering the place of worship?

Did you notice that the text does not even begin to explore this question?

Did you also notice that we are not told the man's name? He is just “the Ethiopian Eunuch” defined by first, his race, and then, his sexuality.

*But* did you also notice that we know the name of the man who explains the scripture to him: Philip the Evangelist, as opposed to Philip the Apostle. In fact, in this brief text, his name is mentioned 10 times.

I have talked several times about the fact that how we read Scripture depends on who we are, where we stand in relation to the text and how we engage with it. So one African American scholar I read has a different take on this passage from that of her white, male counterparts. Similarly, as an African-born person, I am drawn to the secondary character in this story.

I say the secondary character because this passage also demonstrates how Scripture itself is written from a particular perspective for a particular audience and with particular purpose.

For Luke, this story is all about Philip. It is about his faithfulness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that directs him to leave Samaria, where he has been proselytising among the Samaritans, and travel south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. It is about his subtle, very respectful approach to “witnessing”, sharing the faith with the Ethiopian, not imposing himself on the man.

These are themes entirely worthy of celebration and exploration, but they are not the only possible approach to this story.

If the text had been written by an African or someone deemed an “outsider” because of their sexuality, perhaps the royal official would have been the main character and identified by his name.

The Ethiopian eunuch must have had some kind of experience of God to make this astounding pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple to worship; to be willing to risk yet another experience of exclusion. He must have a strong desire to find a place of spiritual belonging and acceptance, not excluded on racial and sexual grounds. He must have sufficient reason to think that the God of Israel will accept him.

He fails all the ritual purity requirements to worship in the Jerusalem Temple. As a black, Gentile, eunuch he cannot belong in Israel. But he is not cast out or cut off by God, as Philip explains, culminating in his baptism into the new community of faith.

I want to pose two questions for us to ponder.

First, what would make you undertake the equivalent of a chariot journey of over 5 000km? About what do you care enough about to do something so challenging and dramatic?

Second, “Who are the outsiders for you? Who are the people whom you exclude, or are tempted to exclude? Whom would you be surprised to discover is accepted, loved and known by God?”

Interestingly, just further on from the passage that the treasury overseer is reading, there is this passage from Isaiah:

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.  
*Isaiah 56 3-5*

**References**

Workingpreacher.com  
 Holytextures.com  
 Sermonwriter.com  
 Seasons of the spirit online  
*Eating with the Bridegroom*, Liturgical Press, 2005, John Shea  
 Catholic encyclopaedia online

Manutd.ru:

**Philip's Ministry**

..... Philip Goes to Samaria  
 --- Philip Goes to the Gaza Road  
 - . - Philip Appears in Azotus and Goes to Caesarea

- In Jerusalem Philip was one of the deacons (Acts 6:5)
- In Samaria Philip preached and converted many Samaritans including Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:4)
- Philip obeys the angel and goes to the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. Here he leads the Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Jesus and baptizes him (Acts 8:26)
- The Spirit takes Philip to Azotus (Acts 8:40)
- Philip preaches in the towns along the coast
- Philip settles in the city of Caesarea. He lives here for at least 20 years and raises four daughters. (Acts 21:8)