

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

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During the liturgical season of Easter, as we noted last week, the lectionary suggests readings from two New Testament books – the gospel of John and the book titled The Acts of the Apostles, two texts that have a strikingly different feel.

The passages from John's gospel (such John 15 – the vine and the branches) come from the Last Supper Discourse – words of Jesus purportedly spoken just before his death – longish discourses in which he describes who he is, what his life is about, and what this means for how *they* are to live. John says explicitly that the disciples aren't going to understand any of this until after the resurrection, and it's true, they don't. Nevertheless, there's something very settled and peaceable about these words.

In contrast, the stories in Acts depict the experience of Jesus' followers in the aftermath of his resurrection, trying to figure out what happened.

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 and of living into it. The encounter of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch comes at a key juncture in this process – the life of the embryonic Christian community. Up until now, Acts has concentrated on action in the city of Jerusalem – the disciples proclaiming the message of Jesus' to 'fellow Israelites' (Acts 2.29). The new Christian community is blooming there, and this attracted the increasingly organised hostility of religious authorities; 'a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem', we read,

and many of the new believers ‘were scattered through the countryside of Judea and Samaria’ (8. 1). Philip is one of them. In the aftermath he began preaching in Samaria, and as we pick up the story, he’s just received a prompting from an angel to head south on the Gaza Road.

This directive is both clear and vague. He knows *where* to go, the Gaza road. But as to why? He’s given no clue. This is intriguing, since the Gaza road is out in the wilderness, the backblocks. What possessed Philip to go to such an out of the way place, to think this ‘prompting’ was from God? It strikes me as a bold move, even a bit rash!

In the distance Philip sees a man trundling along in a chariot, a foreigner from Ethiopia. This man (we’re told) is an important court official to Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. And he’s also a eunuch, and that’s important for our understanding of this story. A eunuch is a man, who, before puberty, has had, *at the least*, his testicles removed. It was a dangerous operation, with severe implications. 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 bones from growing, most eunuchs had unnaturally long limbs and often suffered from obesity. These people looked and sounded strange, and occupied a kind of liminal space in society.

Interestingly, this man had been to Jerusalem to worship God and was returning home. How did this happen? What had drawn him to the Jewish faith? And, deeply enough to be making a journey to the temple to worship; deeply enough to be reading from the Jewish scriptures on his way home? Whatever it was, this man was on a spiritual journey.

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 divine initiative in this story— working in Philip, working in the eunuch].

Notice also the importance of attending. Philip runs up to the chariot and hears the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah. After some time, listening, he asks him: ‘*Do you understand what you’re reading?*’ Notice that, he first asks a question. [He doesn’t say, ‘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 bible tract in his face or barge in preaching. No, he draws alongside, and listens respectfully. And, only then, does he ask: ‘*Do you understand what you’re reading?*’] I love this story, it’s so hospitable, so genuinely relational and respectful.

And interestingly, the eunuch responds with a question of his own: ‘How *can* I understand unless someone guides me?’ Philip’s open-ended, respectful approach engenders conversation ... And, as so often happens in genuine conversation, barriers come down and bridges are built - *the eunuch* invites Philip to get in and sit beside him. And again, I love what this suggests about mission. Philip meets this man where *he* is; he doesn’t demand that the eunuch join his church and his program, or become like him. No, Philip joins the eunuch on *his* journey in *his* space; listens to *his* questions at *his* pace.

And this brings us to the text the eunuch was reading, a text that has him perplexed. 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 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 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?*

And starting with *this* Scripture, *this* question, 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. 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 and respect in this missional encounter.*

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 and 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.

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. He leaves it to God, who was clearly at work *before* Philip came along, and who clearly continued working afterwards.

There's a great deal of anxiety in the church these days. We worry about our future. This story affirms the presence of the Spirit, and 'where the spirit is, there is life'! Our role is not to *make it happen*, but to be attentive and responsive to what's *already happening*, and to how we can participate. There's no anxiety in this story, despite the uncondusive circumstances--persecution, scattering, the unlikeliness

of a desert 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? *'Look, here's some water. What's to prevent me from being baptised?'* And Philip's answer? Nothing. There's nothing is to prevent you from becoming one with God and 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'.*

And that's a mission we can all get excited about!