
The Ethiopian Eunuch

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 20th September

Isaiah 53:4-7 Acts 8:26-40



Let's pray to begin, living God, may your Word settle in our hearts, shape our minds, set a path for our feet. May it enlighten us that we might serve you in newness of life, and in reverence and awe, amen.

I brought my friend in an elephant the other day, and told him that I'd put it in his room. He said "thanks". I said "don't mention it".

There are some things that we avoid talking about because of the challenge. In the Anglican church one of the elephants in the room is the decline in church attendance, and what we might need to change to address that.

One thing for sure. We can't change the word of God to accommodate to the norms and practices of society. Equally we can't shortchange the word of God.

A survey was conducted in regards what people are looking for in sermons. Men were looking for content. Women were looking for connection.

As far as meeting those diverse needs, you can't do it without time and effort. You have to on the one hand be faithful to scripture and rightly understand it in its context. On the other you have to build a bridge right into the lives and experiences of those who are listening.

Let me say as strongly and as clearly as I can. If there is a lack of bottoms on pews today, it is more than anything else, because there is a dearth of preachers in pulpits today.

Look at any Anglican church that is growing, and I mean true growth, conversation and spiritual growth, as compared Christians changing church addresses, because the flavour of what they have is not quite to their taste. You will find a correlation between growth, and the gospel being clearly, faithfully, and probably passionately, proclaimed.

Yes, you also need a great children's programme if you want young families. And you need a bunch of people who are willing to invite their friends to church.

But if we go back to what men and women have said they are looking for in preaching, it is little wonder that, in the average Anglican Church, at least 80% of the attendees are women.

And thank God for them. By enlarge they are keeping the Anglican Church going. They also are often the keenest to see the faith passed down to the children, grandchildren, great grandchildren.

And isn't passing on the faith is what it is all about?

We continue with the story of Acts.

- How the Gospel continues to break new ground as far as territory.
- How barriers are broken as disparate groups of people are unified in and through the gospel.

Of course the greatest barrier that first needs to be broken down is the one between a holy God, and sinful humanity. That's the starting point as the work of the cross is applied to our lives as individuals, then as a community.

So to the passage in hand. In the first half of this ch Philip took the Gospel into Samaria and to a group that were scorned and rejected. Jesus uses the example of the "good Samaritan" in his parable to make a point. A good Samaritan was an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

Here in Acts as the Samaritans accept the gospel and are filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles being instrumental in that happening, it reinforced the idea that if God accepts the Samaritans, the Jewish believers needed to accept them as well.

Further, the Samaritan believers, who had centuries before set up a rival worship centre, had to understand they needed to come under the authority of the Apostles. They would need to hold to a gospel cantered on apostolic teaching. As indeed we do, if we are to remain faithful to the scriptures. Something that is imperative if we are to have any chance of seeing real gospel growth in our church and community.

As we saw in the first half of this ch, as the gospel “comes” to the Samaritans, so “goes” a 1000 year breach in Jew, Samaritan relationships.

Now another barrier is going to be broken as the Gospel is shared with the Ethiopian Eunuch. He is a leading official, a royal courtier from an area that roughly corresponds to where Sudan at the top end of Africa is found today. He is in charge of the treasury of Queen Candice, the Queen Mother.

As sensitively as I can a little background on Eunuch's.

Because they could not engage in sexual activity they were specially chosen for certain roles. For example looking after a king's harem. Or in this case, looking after the Queen Mother.

They often rose to great prominence royal courts, and were looked on as trusted because they posed no threat to the dynasty and power passing down to the next in line.

The emasculation of a eunuch usually happened between the ages of 6-8 with many not surviving the process. Eunuchs had historically been prohibited from certain religious roles, such as serving in the Temple. Deut 23:1 “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.

In Christ though, and with the bringing in of a new temple, one made with living stones, another barrier is demolished. Even a eunuch can be fully included in the community of faith.

So as we read the story, this eunuch, probably a black African Jew, either by birth or conversion, was returning home after worshiping in Jerusalem. He was reading Isa 53 out loud when Philip was directed to him. He may well have been familiar with Isaiah 56 as well, and been curious how the promises of Isa 56 might be realised in his own life.

Isiah 56:4

“for thus says the Lord,
to the eunuch who keeps my Sabbath,

who choose the things that please me,
and holds fast to 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.”

No pun intended. But that would be good news indeed to a eunuch. The gospel is about to enter new territory. And all are welcome. That said let's look at some practical lessons that could help us in regards sharing the Gospel.

First thing I want to note is in vs 26 and 29. Philip is getting and following instructions. When it comes to proclaiming the gospel, you will not speak well, unless you first hear well.

Vs 26 an angel of the Lord gives Philip a general instruction. “Rise and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place.

While the road was a well used one, leading from Jerusalem to upper Egypt, the detail that it was a “desert place” may have seemed somewhat odd to an evangelist like Philip. “Go to a desert place.” Not many people there. There was at least one. The one God wanted to reach.

Vs 29, Philip having been obedient to the general somewhat vague, even maybe strange instruction, now gets a specific one. “and the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.”

I sometimes have a sense that God is giving me a specific instruction. “Go and talk to this or that person”. “Pray about this or that thing”. “Do this and not that”. Generally though, my instructions are not specific. Most unusually I'm directed in a general sense as I spend time in God's Word.

Philip, as we shall see in a moment, knew the Word. If he hadn't his conversation with the EE would have been nowhere near as effective. So:

- It pays to listen before we speak.
- We generally get general instructions before we get specific ones.

Vs 26 “head of in that direction.” Vs 29 “that guy.”

Thinking about general and specific instructions can also be very liberating. It takes a lot of pressure off knowing we don't have to share the gospel with everyone. Only with the ones God directs us too.

It's also helpful, and liberating, to bear in mind that God is the real evangelist. Unless God is preparing the ground. Unless God is working in the heart of a person, our words will fall on deaf ears.

God led Phillip, generally, then specifically.

And very clearly God had been preparing this man for what was going to happen. Even down to the scripture passage he was reading. Further, every detail of the conversation between Philip and the EE shows God was very much a part of both sides of the conversation.

Verse 30 Philip, as instructed, runs over to the chariot and hears Isaiah 53 being read aloud. Its obvious he can hear the eunuch. He must also be hearing the Holy Spirit as well, because Philip asks the perfect question. "Do you understand what you are reading." That question invites the Ethiopian eunuch to share where he was on his faith journey.

If someone tells me they think Jesus was an "alien from a superior civilisation", I would probably say something like "yeah that's a really interesting perspective". "You know what? You are kind of right in a couple of ways."

Jesus is superior. And he is from another realm. I might even be able to build a bridge into the way the apostle John begins his gospel with the incarnation. But I wouldn't use that word. I would just talk about God meeting us right where we are. God graciously built a bridge that we might understand and know him.

My point. If you listen carefully. If you try to meet people where they are. If you know the word of God. You can lead them forward in their spiritual understanding. It's exactly what Philip does. He is not known as "Philip the evangelist" without reason.

It's also what we see the apostle Paul do in Acts Ch 18 as he looks around Athens greatly distressed at all the idols. He builds a bridge. He says "I see you are very religious". You even have an alter to an unknown God". "What you worship unknown let me reveal to you".

So, as we are trying to describe the best component parts of communication. If, on the one side, we have a willingness to meet people exactly where they are. On the other side we would have teachability and humility.

Vs 30. Do you understand what you are reading. V 31, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" He then invites Philip to come and sit with him.

Meeting people where they are. Teachability and humility. And of course holding to the truth. We don't compromise the gospel just to get a hearing.

Full disclosure. There are two reasons I love preaching.

- Firstly the encouragement and joy that I get, if others are encouraged or helped from God's word.
- Secondly, it forces me to keep learning and growing.

I would be very nervous standing here if I did not spend adequate time in God's Word. Preachers are accountable. When training preachers it is often said "every min in the pulpit should be preceded by an hour in the study". Further, if folk in the church value biblical exposition, and sound teaching they need to free the minister to do it.

"Do you understand what you are reading?"

"How can I unless someone guides me?"

You are now Philip.

You have heard and followed God's general instruction.

You have been directed to a particular person.

You have listened.

You have asked a great question and have been given an even better answer.

Now this God seeker has asked you to join him, or her, so they can be helped in their spiritual journey. How are you feeling?

Thankful. Nervous. Wishing you'd ignored the voice in your head telling you to get involved. Confident ??????

The bit that really challenges me and makes me wonder if I would be up to the task is vs 35. Let me begin though at vs 32.

Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter

and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

"About whom does the prophet say this,
about himself or about someone else?"

Vs 35, Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus .

I think it would be true to say that Isaiah 53 is so obviously about Jesus, that as believers in Jesus, it would be hard not to make the connection. The EE was not there yet. “Is Isaiah talking about himself or someone else?”

“And beginning with this scripture he told him the good news about Jesus”. “beginning with this scripture”. That’s the bit that challenges me. Knowing the word so well that you could use the seekers question about the bible as a starting point, and then go on to draw in other relevant passages so as to unpack the gospel.

Remember in Luke how Jesus on the road to Emmaus opened the scriptures to the two travellers. “How beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

Philip knew the word. He was a good listener. He was a great teacher. And not without effect. Vs 36, And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptised?”

The eunuch gets it. There is nothing getting in the way of him fully meeting with God. Just like Isa 56 promised. The one who was childless could have an inheritance. He is confident as well. Vs 38 “And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water.”

Then, following the baptism Philip is supernaturally whisked away to another place to continue his work. The EE returns home full of the fruit of the Spirit, joy. And why not. He now understands the Gospel.

Who knows the Boy Scout motto? “Be prepared.”

“And beginning with a very passage he told him the good news about Jesus”. To share the story we need to know the story. We Might get specific instructions at times. Generally though God will speak to us using words already given to us in the scriptures.

Let’s end on the fact that Joy is mentioned twice in this chapter. As Philip brings the gospel to Samaria there was much joy in that city.”

Here as a eunuch, one cut off from the potential of inheritance, understands the gospel, and accepts Christ, he has both an inheritance, even eternal life, and great joy. It is called good news for good reason. Let’s pray...

