

“The Ethiopian eunuch”

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Acts 8:26-40

The church in Ethiopia is strong, with over 40 million Christians in a population of around 70 million. It traces its origins back to the high-ranking Ethiopian official who was baptised on the road to Gaza around 40 AD, although it appears it was not till the 4th century that Christianity really took off in Ethiopia, when King Ezanan was converted and declared the Christian faith to be the national religion.

We know very little about this Ethiopian who was assisted by Philip to understand the prophecies of Isaiah and who converted to Christianity on the spot. He was obviously a thoughtful and curious person. We know only that he'd come to Jerusalem to worship yet he was not a Jew; we are told he was the treasurer of the Ethiopian kingdom, a high official within the court of the Queen, probably Queen Hendeke VII who reigned in the 40s AD; the Bible spares us no blushes by referring to him bluntly and repeatedly as a eunuch; and after his baptism he continues on his way home with rejoicing. And that's all we know of him.

Nevertheless, the story of his conversion contains several important principles and teachings about the life and growth of the infant church.

For instance, did you notice the strength of conviction in our narrative about God being in charge of what was happening. There's an angel who tells Philip to get out of bed and head for the wilderness road towards Gaza. Then it's the Spirit that tells Philip to join the Ethiopian in his chariot, and when all is sorted out and the Ethiopian is baptised it's the Spirit that miraculously snatches Philip away on to his next mission, to preach up and down the coastal cities of Palestine before settling in Caesarea. The early church had a very clear sense of God guiding it, empowering it, and bringing success.

A second emphasis is on the good news of Jesus Christ. In verses 35 and 40 specific reference is made to Philip proclaiming the good news about Jesus. The word in the Greek is εὐαγγέλιον, or evangel, literally good news. Later on in the book of Acts Philip is actually titled “Philip the evangelist” (21:8), such was his commitment to telling and living the good news about Jesus. It's the good news of God's love and salvation for all, shown and achieved through Jesus, that brings about the conversion of the Ethiopian and the growth of the early church.

So far so good, we can expect the early stories of Christian growth to speak of God's direct empowering and of the message of God's love in Christ. That's a bit ho-hum really. But in this story there are two unexpected emphases which are crucial in clarifying and defining the parameters of this new Christian faith – and which explain why this story was told over and over for years before it was recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. It contains important learnings for the early church.

The first is Ethiopia! Goodness, Ethiopia was far far away. Remember the story of the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was received and visiting pilgrims “from every nation under heaven” heard the apostles speaking in their own languages. A long list of those nationalities is given in Acts chapter 2 – but Ethiopia is not among them. Ethiopia was regarded as the ends of the earth, it was beyond the Roman empire, the people there were black-skinned, it was a mysterious unknown place, far far away. Yet God ensures that even this remote region will hear the good news about Jesus, there are no physical limitations on the reach of

the gospel message, it's to be proclaimed to the very ends of the earth. With Christianity's roots firmly grounded in the Jewish faith of the time, with its inherent nationalism and racism, the fact that the new faith was open to every nationality, every race, was revolutionary, ground-breaking.

And the second is another revolutionary step. The Ethiopian is a eunuch! While some more liberal Jewish thinkers of the time wondered if the Hebrew Scriptures' discrimination against people who were physically less than whole was truly correct, they could hardly dispute with the very specific rule laid down in Deuteronomy 23 which stated unequivocally (and I quote) that "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord". Yet Philip, guided by God's Spirit, does not hesitate to share the good news of God's love and salvation with this less than whole Ethiopian and to baptise him into the faith, to welcome him into the life of the Christian church. This new faith is for all, God's love is for every human being no matter what disability or disease or affliction has come our way.

We in the church need always to be reminded that our faith is worldwide and our faith is open to everyone, no matter what the situation. That's what is driving the growth of the church in places like India for instance, where the major growth is among the Dalit people, the so-called "untouchables" who in traditional Indian culture are the lowest of the low, almost sub-human – so the message of God's love and salvation for them is met with great joy. That's what is driving the growth of the church in many parts of Africa, where people struggling with poverty and oppression and the depredations of HIV-AIDS, discover that God loves them, not just the rich and the healthy and the pure. God's love is universal, for all.

There's an old traditional Communion prayer which says that "we are not worthy to eat the crumbs that fall off God's table". Now while that's true, in that each of us is imperfect, each of us has weaknesses, disabilities, physical frailties, personal failings, that none of us is fully worthy of God's love – yet it's God who regards us as worthy of his love. God loves us, despite our frailties and failings.

The Ethiopian eunuch. Wow – a person normally regarded in those times as well beyond the reach of civilisation, well out of reach of God's love, unacceptable to be part of religious observances. Yet God reaches out in love and says to him yes, you are loved, you are saved, you belong in my family. And so do we!

To the glory of God, Amen.