

## ACTS 8.26-40: LOOKING AT SCRIPTURE THROUGH FILTERS

*Preached 7 May 2006*

When I was in my mid-teens photography was one of my hobbies.

My parents gave me a second-hand German Zeiss camera – although it wasn't the world's greatest camera, at least it wasn't a Box Brownie.

I had an uncle who was also keen on photography – and I spent many a happy afternoon in his darkroom doing my own developing.

One of the things which I enjoyed most of all was using filters: for instance, it was amazing the difference it made to my pictures when I used a yellow filter with a black and white film – for the yellow filter would sharpen the picture, and would bring out the clouds in a spectacular way.

Alas, a disaster took place with my use of filters when I went to Austria for a holiday. For on that occasion I used colour film – but stupidly, I also used my yellow filter – with the result that my photographs were yellow too!

Yes, *it's amazing the difference a filter can make.*

And what is true in photography, is also true in the reading and study of Scripture.

For you see when we come to read Scripture, all of us read it through a particular filter – the filter in this case being the context in which we find ourselves.

### 1. THE FILTER OF AFRICA

Take the story of Philip and the Ethiopian official.

The story has a very different feel to it if you happen to be black rather than white. For if you are black, then probably the first thing you notice is that character at the centre of the story was black too. For he was an “**Ethiopian**” (v27).

Incidentally, when Luke speaks about Ethiopia, he did not have modern Ethiopia in mind, but rather the ancient kingdom of Nubia, to the south of present-day Egypt, that part of the world which today is Sudan.

The capital of Nubia was Meroe, situated well below Abu Simbel, between the 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> cataracts of the Nile, and was a capital of a major power as early as 540 BC and continuing to at least AD 339.

For present-day Africans all this is highly significant: this high-ranking official was a black African from a powerful black nation.

What's more, long before we read of a white European coming to Christ, here is a story of a black African coming to Christ.

Interestingly, if you read the Bible through an African filter, then you will see that this is not the only time that Africa plays a significant role in the New Testament. .

- e.g. it was Africa that offered a home to Jesus and his parents, when Herod was seeking to kill all children two and under – for it was to Egypt that Mary and Joseph fled with the baby Jesus (Matt 2.13,15)
- e.g. it was an African who first bore the cross of Jesus. For when Jesus stumbled on his way to Calvary, it was Simon of Cyrene who was pressed into service
- e.g. it was an African who was one of the most gifted preachers in the early church. For in Acts 18.24 Luke tells us that Apollos, who “**was an eloquent speaker and had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures**” came from Alexandria.

Filters make a difference. However, it must be said that the filter does not always pick up what was present in the mind of the original author.

Luke, for instance, was not interested in the colour of the Ethiopian, for he along with his contemporaries was colour blind – colour-blind in the sense that there is no evidence in antiquity of widespread prejudice against a particular group of people simply because of their colour.

No, Luke probably included this story because it was an example of the Gospel reaching “**the ends of the earth**” (Acts 1.8). For as far as the ancient geographers were concerned, Ethiopia was right on the edge of the world – according to Homer, Ethiopians were “*the last of men*”, in the sense that they formed the last frontier.

And yet, although Luke would have been surprised to see what Africans have made of this story, the filter in itself does not contradict Scripture – it simply applies Scripture in a different way, and in applying it makes a valid point.

In today’s world, for instance, where Muslims equate Christianity with the West, it is good to be reminded that Christianity from the beginning has been associated with the South. The fact is that Jesus is good news – whatever skin-colour we may have, whatever race we may belong to, whoever we may be.

Filters can be helpful. As an illustration of this, today I want to look at the story of the Philip and the Ethiopian official through three other filters.

## 2. THE FILTER OF NURTURE

Within a week or so of my return from sabbatical, Bridget told me that the church’s nurture team hoped that at some stage this month we would focus on aspects of prayer and Bible reading. It all links in with our church’s priorities for 2006, one of which is to ‘be committed to personal development’.

I responded by saying that I would do this on the first Sunday of May.

Initially I thought I would give a simple structure for how one might have a Quiet Time – but since last Sunday’s preacher did precisely that, I propose to look at this passage more generally using the filter of nurture.

As we do so, two things immediately catch our attention.

### (a) *Listen to God*

First, although there is no specific mention of prayer, the clear implication is that ***Philip was a man of prayer***, a man who set aside time to listen to God speaking to him, and as a result was a man who was sensitive to God’s leading.

So the story begins: “**An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get ready and go south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza’**” (8.26).

What actually happened? Did God actually send an angel to Philip? If somebody else have been with Philip at that time, would they have seen and heard an angel?

Probably not. Almost certainly Luke is just using a vivid expression to say that God spoke to Philip – he spoke to him not through an external vision, but inwardly, in his heart.

As the story develops, Luke says it was the Spirit who was speaking:

- V29: **“The Holy Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to that carriage and stay close to it’”**
- V39: **“When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away”**

I don't believe we are to make a distinction between an angel speaking and the Spirit speaking or indeed God speaking. Nor are we to imagine that God spoke out loud. It is much more likely that Philip felt an inward compulsion in his heart, which he recognised to be divine in origin.

Philip was a man sensitive to God's leading – and almost certainly he was sensitive, because he had developed an ability to listen to God. If we are to be sensitive to God's leading, then we too need to develop an ability to listen to God.

To develop such an ability, we need in the first place to listen.

Last Sunday we were being urged to spend 10 minutes with God – three minutes reading the Scriptures, three minutes meditating on the Scriptures, three minutes praying, and one minute listening!

If we would hear God, if we would know God's leading, then we must listen to God!

#### ***b) Learn from God***

The second thing I notice using the filter of nurture, is that we often need help to understand the Scriptures. Look at vv30, 31: **“Philip ran over and heard him reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. He asked him, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ The official replied, ‘How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?’ And he invited Philip to climb up and sit in the carriage with him”**.

The Ethiopian was fortunate: he had Philip to explain the Scriptures to him.

But we too are fortunate – for although we may not have the services of our own personal chaplain, we do have help on hand when it comes to reading the Scriptures. This help comes in various forms.

- In the first place, we have the help of Bible reading notes. Scripture Union, for instance, produces a wide-range of Bible reading notes to help us understand the Scriptures.
- Secondly, we have the help of Bible commentaries. IVP has published not only an excellent one-volume *Bible Commentary*, but it has also produced a wonderful series of commentaries on individual Bible books entitled, *‘The Bible Speaks Today’*. Or you might want to get hold of the new series of guides to the New Testament by Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham: entitled *‘for Everyone’*.

The fact is that we need help to read the Scriptures – and thank God, godly men have devoted their lives to helping us understand the Scriptures. If we would grow in our understanding of the faith, then we need to make the most of these helps.

Only so can we really learn from God.

### 3. THE FILTER OF EVANGELISM

But another approach to this passage is possible. If we take off the filter of nurture, and put on the filter of evangelism, then we find God speaking to us in a different way. For in many ways Philip offers us an excellent model of an evangelist.

#### a) *Begin where people are*

In the first place, we learn from this passage that we need to begin where people are. When the official asked Philip: **“Tell me, of whom is the prophet saying this? Of himself or of someone else?”** (v34), Philip didn’t reply, *“It’s all about Jesus stupid”*. Rather, he began where the man was, rather than cranking out a canned sermon. Evangelism is not about a sales technique – it is about talking about the issues that concern the other person has.

The Australian evangelist, John Chapman, once said: *“Personal evangelism is not like preaching a sermon one-to-one. It is much more like ‘verbal scrabble’! I say something, he answers, I respond to his answer etc. I know what I want to say ultimately – the gospel. Whether I am able to do so is largely governed by what he says to me and whether the gospel is appropriate in the conversation we have”*.

#### b) *Speak of Jesus*

Secondly, we need to speak of Jesus: v35 **“Then Philip began to speak; starting from this passage of scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus”**.

Yes, we have to be prepared to speak about anything and everything, but ultimately evangelism is speaking about Jesus. The Gospel is not about how God created the world, how God inspired the Scriptures, nor about how God intends the relationship of the sexes to be – the Gospel is about Jesus.

The Indian evangelist, Stanley E. Jones once wrote: *“The early Christians did not say in dismay, ‘Look at what the world has come to!’, but in delight ‘Look who has come to the world!’*.

#### c) *Encourage a decision*

Thirdly, we need to encourage a decision. We have no idea of what exactly Philip said about Jesus. But what we do know is that the time came when the Ethiopian knew that he had to respond to God's love for him: v36: **"As they travelled down the road, they came to a place where there was some water, and the official said, 'Here is some water. What is to keep me from being baptized?"**

Some MSS add a further verse (v37): **Philip said to him, 'you may be baptised if you believe with all your heart'. 'I do', he answered; 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God'.**

If the Gospel is to be good news for the hearer, there must be a response - a decision must be made to follow Christ.

As we seek to share the Good News for Jesus with others, we must do all we can to encourage them to get off the fence and make that crucial decision.

#### 4. THE FILTER OF BAPTISM

There is yet another filter we can use – and that is the filter of baptism. For this is a story of a man who was baptised.

##### *Baptism by immersion*

Good Baptists have pointed out that this story almost certainly teaches that baptism is by immersion, rather than just by sprinkling. For in v38 we read **“The official ordered the carriage to stop and both Philip and the official went down into the water, and Philip baptised him”** (vv36, 38).

Whether it was a pool or a river, we do not know. But whatever it was, Philip and the Ethiopian went down into it. Baptism is a great sign of washing – in Jesus our sins are washed away.

##### *Baptism is for all*

More significantly is the fact that baptism is expected of us all. If we wish to follow of the Lord Jesus, then must follow him in baptism. Baptism is an essential part of Christian discipleship.

Interestingly, however, the Ethiopian doesn't ask, *“Why should I be baptized?”* but **“What is to keep me from being baptised?”** The form of the question is significant. Luke has told us earlier on that the Ethiopian **“had been to Jerusalem to worship God”** (v28). The clear implication is that he was a man in search of God. Dissatisfied with the pagan worship of idols and perhaps the speculation of Greek philosophers, he had undertaken a journey of many days & nights in the hope that he might discover reality in the God of the Jews. But he would have been hindered in his search for God: for he was a **‘eunuch’** (v27) – at some stage in his life he had been castrated, perhaps only in this way could he have been trusted to have acted on behalf of the queen of Ethiopia. But although castration may have had positive influence on his career, spiritually it was a massive ‘downer’. For eunuchs were looked down upon by Jews of Jesus' day - according to their Law eunuchs could never **“be included among the Lord's people”** (Deut 23.1). The eunuch could never have become a Jewish proselyte and in this way admitted to the Temple's ‘court of the men’ – he could only have been allowed in to the outermost court, the court of the Gentiles. So perhaps somewhat fearfully the eunuch asked, **“What is to keep (NRSV: prevent) me from being baptized?”** The answer was nothing - no group of people are disbarred from the Xian faith, whatever their sexual condition or orientation!

##### *Baptism is for believers*

Philip replied: **“You may be baptised if you believe with all your heart”**.

The Ethiopian replied: **“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”** (v37).

Note the context in which the Ethiopian made that confession. He made it in the light of Philip's expounding Isaiah 53. I.e. he was confessing that the one who died on a

Cross, taking upon himself the sins of the world, was the Son of God. In his own way the Ethiopian was simply saying what Paul himself was later to write to the Galatians (2.20): “**The Son of God loved me & gave his life for me**”. I.e. Christian believing - Christian baptism for that matter - centres around Christ crucified and risen.

But there is more to what is involved. Philip did not just say “**You may be baptised if you believe**”, but went on “**If you believe with all your heart**” The believing that Philip had in mind is more than mental assent - it involves the “**heart**”, i.e. it is the kind of believing which pins its very life on that belief. To believe with all one’s heart involves entrusting one’s life to the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.

### **FILTERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

In conclusion: just like my yellow filter made the difference to my black and white films, so filters can make a real difference to the reading of Scripture. Today, for instance, we have seen the one and same Scripture differently – according to filter we have adopted – whether it be the filter of Africa, the filter of nurture, the filter of evangelism, or the filter of baptism. None of the filters have produced a false message – they have simply high-lighted different aspects of Christian believing and living.

Yes, filters make a difference.

That is what makes the daily reading of Scripture so fascinating.

For however often we may have read a particular Scripture passage, it will never speak to us in the same way – for the context in which we find ourselves is constantly changing.

For instance, currently for my daily devotions I am reading through the Book of Acts and John’s Gospel – of course I have read these books of the Bible many times before – but I have never read them before in May 2006. In the context of today, I often find that there are new thoughts which emerge!

In this respect let me conclude with the words of John Robinson spoken to the pilgrim fathers as in 1620 they were about to set sail in the *Mayflower* for the unknown land of America: “*the Lord has more truth and light to break forth out of His holy word*”.