

ACTS 8.26-40: GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

[Chelmsford 22 February 2009]

1. GOOD NEWS FOR ODDBALLS

Have you ever had the experience of being part of a group – and yet not being part of the group. You know you just don't belong. You are the odd man out. On the two occasions I have gone with Caroline to one of her coroners' conferences, I have had this feeling. It's not that I'm not a coroner – other coroners' spouses are there. It's that I'm the husband of a coroner. And that's an odd position to be in – for almost all the other 'tag-ons' are women. Traditionally coroners are male. So that when they have activities for coroners' spouses, they always have women in mind. And I'm not a woman. I'm the odd man out!

That sense of being the odd man out is perhaps the key to the story of the Ethiopian whom Philip met on the Gaza road. Let's take a look at him:

Luke tells us that he was “**an Ethiopian eunuch, who was an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia**” (8.27).

We learn three things about this guy – three things which might have made him feel the odd man out.

1. He was “an Ethiopian”. I guess that there couldn't have been many Ethiopians knocking around Israel at that time.

Actually, when Luke speaks about Ethiopia, he didn't have in mind the modern Ethiopia of today, 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 5th & 6th cataracts of the Nile, and was the capital of a major power as early as 540 BC and remained in that role to at least AD 339.

For people like Philip Ethiopia or Nubia was on the southernmost edge of the world. They would have viewed this African guy as very much an outsider.

However, as the story progresses, we discover that as far as God is concerned, there are no outsiders. Jesus is good news for all – for blacks & for whites, for Africans & for Europeans.

2. He was a “eunuch”. I.e. he had been castrated, poor fellow.

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus tells us that “*in eastern countries eunuchs were valued as being specially trustworthy in every way*”. Sadly that made real sense – if the guy was impotent, then you could trust him with your wife. As a result eunuchs were frequently employed by eastern potentates as senior officers in their household.

But as far as Jews were concerned – and you have to remember that Philip and most of his fellow Christians were from Jewish stock – eunuchs were bad news.

Far from being respected by Jews, they were looked down upon – according to their Law eunuchs could never “**be included among the Lord's people**” (Deut 23.1).

Eunuchs were outsiders – they didn't belong.

However, as the story progresses, we discover that as far as God is concerned, there are no outsiders. Jesus is good news – whatever our sexual condition/orientation might be.

3. ***He was a VIP:*** “**an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia**”. In our terms he was the equivalent of Alistair Darling, he was the ‘Chancellor of the Exchequer’.

Incidentally, you might wonder why he reported to the queen of Ethiopia, rather than to the king. The fact is that the king was regarded as a god – he was called the ‘*child of the sun*’ – and was believed to be too sacred to engage in any administrative duties.

So the running of the kingdom was left to the queen – actually, she was the queen mother, and we know that her name was Amanitäre. This queen had a good deal of wealth – thanks to industries such as iron smelting & gold mining.

To be in charge of the treasury was therefore to be in a highly responsible position. Indeed, it is probably true to say that this guy whom Philip met was one of the top people in Ethiopia – if not the most important person outside the royal family.

I.e. when it came to mixing with ordinary people, this must have made this fellow something of an outsider – he wasn’t ‘one of them’ – he didn’t really belong.

However, as the story progresses, we discover that as far as God is concerned, there are no outsiders. Jesus is good news – whatever your social background might be.

Jesus is indeed good news for oddballs!

Luke tells us that this Ethiopian “**had been to Jerusalem to worship God**” (8.27..

There were no diplomatic reasons for this journey – he hadn’t been to Jerusalem for a conference of the equivalent of the G7. He had gone “**to worship God**”.

Somehow the pagan worship of idols just didn’t switch him on – perhaps it was all too crude and all too primitive.

Nor did the speculations of Greek philosophers satisfy him – there was nothing to warm the human heart.

So he undertook a journey of many days and nights in the hope that he might discover reality in the God of the Jews.

But that search was doomed to failure – for he was unwanted, he was an outsider.

In one sense the Ethiopian was a highly unusual person – his background was unusual, his sexual condition was unusual, his job was unusual.

And yet in one respect he was & is typical of many – he wanted to find God.

He was dissatisfied with life as it was – although materially he must have been comfortably off, spiritually he was desperately poor.

He longed to find God – he longed to discover the purpose for which he was made.

The fact is that there is within each one of us a God-shaped blank – and without God none of us is truly complete.

So there he was, on his way back home, “**on the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza**” (see the map), still searching for God.

While he was in Jerusalem he had bought himself a scroll containing the prophecy of Isaiah – it wasn’t just a souvenir: it was really a means to help him search for God.

And on the way back home, he was reading it.

Just imagine the scene: almost certainly the Ethiopian was not on his own – there was a driver – and probably there was a man-servant reading to him.

And Philip just happened to pass by.

“**Philip heard him reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah**” (8.30a)

In particular he heard him reading two verses from Is 53.7,8: **“Like a sheep that is taken to be slaughtered, like a lamb that makes no sound when its wool is cut off, he did not say a word”** (8.32).

Philip called out **“Do you understand what you are reading?”** (8.30).

Gosh, that must have taken guts on Philip’s part – he could have expected the brush-off. But to his credit the Ethiopian was honest enough to say *“No”* and invited Philip to climb up & sit with him in his carriage (8.31). **“Tell me, of whom is the prophet saying this?”** (8.34)

If ever there was a God-given opportunity for a sermon, this was it.

Philip grabbed it with both hands & **“starting from this passage told him the Good News of Jesus”** (8.35b)

2. JESUS IS GOOD NEWS

I wish we had a transcript of the sermon.

All Luke tells us that: **“Philip... told him the good news of Jesus”** (v35).

In telling him **“the good news of Jesus”** he would have started with the death of Jesus.

Martin Luther was right when he said: *“If you want to understand the Christian message, you must start with the wounds of Christ”*

In this respect the scroll was quite literally a godsend. For there in 53.5 the prophet wrote: **“Because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received”**.

Philip would have pointed out to the Ethiopian that what was special about the death of Jesus was not that he had died on a cross - 1000s in their time had died on crosses, but not one of them had died for the salvation of the world.

No, what was special was that **“the Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved”** (Is 53.6)

I.e. Mr Chancellor, when Jesus died, he took upon himself the sin of the world - he paid the price for your sins and for mine. As a result he has opened up a way back to God.

Mr Chancellor, your search for God is over. God has come to us in Jesus.

I wonder, however, whether there was more to the sermon than that?

I wonder whether Philip applied the words of Isaiah in a particular way to the Ethiopian.

- The passage from Isaiah speaks of somebody who has been **“humiliated”** – the Ethiopian in spite of his status knew what humiliation was all about – he had just been cold-shouldered by the religious people of Jerusalem. Sorry, friend, but you’re a eunuch, and there is no place in our religion for people like you.
- The passage from Isaiah also speaks of a man who had **“no descendants”** – that was certainly true of the Ethiopian too: in no way could he have family.

There may be times, Mr Chancellor, when you feel an outsider – the odd man out.

But Jesus knows what that is to an outsider – he too was rejected by others, he too had no family. But the good news is that there is a place for you and other others like you in his Kingdom. Indeed, there is room for all.

Jesus cares not just for folk who are happy in the crowd, but also for those who feel they don’t belong. It doesn’t matter who you are & what you have done, Jesus’ arms on that cross were outstretched for you.

3. THE GOOD NEWS DEMANDS A RESPONSE

What else Philip said, we don't know. All we do know is that **"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 baptised?"** (8.36)

Why the Ethiopian mentioned baptism, we don't know.

Perhaps Philip, as he preached about the necessity to respond to Christ, made it clear that our response needs to involve baptism.

Certainly this was the way in which Peter preached on the day of Pentecost.

To those who cried out **'What shall we do?'**, Peter replied: **"Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven"**. (Acts 2.42)

"What is to keep ME from being baptised?"

Perhaps even at this stage the Ethiopian wondered whether he might be excluded. Could Jesus really be good news for a man like him?

Philip replied: **"You may be baptised if you believe with all your heart"** (8.37)

Notice there is a two-fold condition;

"You may be baptised if you BELIEVE.....". Baptism is for believers – but the question then arises 'in what'? *'What do we need to believe?'*

The answer is found in the Ethiopian's response: **"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"** (8.37).

Do 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 has 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.

The difference between the two kinds of believing is illustrated in the story of the Frenchman, Charles Blondin, who in June 1858 crossed the Niagara Falls on a 1100 foot tight-rope. On landing on the Canadian side, he told the onlookers that he proposed to re-cross the Falls with a man on his back. *'Do you believe I am able to carry you across?'*, he asked one man. *'I certainly do'*, the man replied. *'Then will you let me do it?'* *'Not on your life!'* came the quick reply.

He believed - but he was not willing to entrust himself totally to Blondin

"You may be baptised if you believe with all your heart"

To believe with all your heart involves entrusting one's life to the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.

Baptism is the great sign and symbol of this desire.

In baptism Jamie will be entrusting himself to the Christ who died for him and rose for him - he will be publicly giving his all to Jesus - and in so doing will make public his resolve to cease going his way, and instead go Christ's way.

But let's go back to the Ethiopian: "**What is to keep me from being baptised?**"

His request for baptism seems all so very sudden. For although he may well have been searching for God for years, it was only in matter of a few hours at the most that he was exposed to the good news of Jesus.

Jamie by contrast has taken his time – indeed, Jamie told me on Monday that Ali says she has been waiting 8 years for Jamie to be baptised.....

But in the end, what counts is not the speed with which we come, but that we come.

As I end my sermon this morning, my question is this: "*Will you come? What is there to keep you from being baptised?*"

As you see Jamie baptised, ask yourself: "*Where do I stand?*"

This morning we invite you to come to Jesus - to find meaning & purpose for the present, to find forgiveness for the past & hope for the future.

To find that Jesus is indeed the way back to God

Luke tells us that after he had been baptised, the Ethiopian "**continued on his way, full of joy**" (8.39). Wouldn't it be marvellous if it could be said of people this morning: they came to Central Baptist, heard the good news of Jesus, decided to entrust their lives to him, and then **continued** on their way, **full of joy!**