

## **Sermon for Park Road Baptist Church 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

### **On the Way to Gaza – Acts 8. 20-40.**

Before the lockdown I had agreed to take service in the summer, with this passage as the text: the Ethiopian eunuch. It so happens that, for a long time now, I have been intrigued by the Book of Acts. As we know, it is the second scroll of Luke's narrative about the emergence of the Christian Church onto the world scene; the first being the Gospel, setting out the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both are written to Theophilus, which means 'God lover'. We do not know who Theophilus is. Is it a pseudonym for a Roman Christian? Would he have been identifiable to his contemporaries? Or is it a general name, like Jane Austin's, 'Dear reader'? In any case, Luke betrays a clear interest in showing that the Christian faith is not anti-Roman. Perhaps Theophilus is a magistrate who has to be so persuaded, like Felix before whom Paul stood trial! (24) Luke is, therefore, not just setting out a simple historical narrative but describing also the faith and practice of the Church and its relationship with the wider community. It is a kind of living parable of faithful action. He is saying: 'You want to know what this Christian thing is? Let me take you, by way of the story as I have found it, through how it came to be AND show you how it works itself out'. It is, perhaps, the first Christian apology, that is an attempt not to grovel but to offer a defence of and reason for the Christian faith.

#### **The setting.**

The first thing, therefore, we need to know about this familiar passage, so beloved of Baptists, is where it comes in the narrative and how it contributes to the story.

The primary framework of Acts is set out in the commandment of the risen Jesus: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.' (1.8) So, at first, we find ourselves in Jerusalem and the emergent structures of the Church. Persecution drives many out into Judea and Samaria. Then it takes off from the new centre at Antioch and, with Paul in the van, it reaches the heart of the Empire, Rome. But it ends tantalisingly abruptly, with Paul in open prison awaiting his imperial hearing. Dare we suggest that there should have been a third scroll, with Paul, as he indicates in Romans (15.24) and which has also been rumoured, reaching Spain and the Pillars of Hercules, where the Mediterranean meets the encircling ocean – the 'ends of the earth'?

So why has our incident been slipped in? It feels odd. Luke must have had to edit material out to get it to fit into a single scroll but chose to incorporate it. Now, Philip, as the first part of the chapter tells us, was the apostle to the Samaritans and so a vital link in the chain. Interestingly, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch come immediately after the founding of the Church in Samaria; but not just because Philip is at the centre of both, but because it adds to the wider story?

#### **The road to Gaza.**

First, it takes place on the coast road to Gaza, which runs south to Egypt and thence down the Nile or via the Red Sea, into Africa and Ethiopia. Also, while the eunuch has no name we

have the name of his mistress, Queen Candace, which appears, however, to be not a personal but a dynastic title, like Pharaoh in Egypt. Nevertheless, such a piece of information was not accidental. Such references are usually only given if they are likely to be recognised, or are of some importance. It would seem, therefore, that what we have here is some suggestion that the gospel has travelled south into new territory. This is not surprising as there were strong historical links with Egypt and beyond, going back to Jeremiah. It is supposed that merchants would have first brought the faith down the Red Sea and the Nile. The Ethiopic Orthodox Church, we know, was set up in the fourth century, but would have had long historical roots. Are we seeing Luke recognising that there were other avenues of evangelisation than Paul's journey west? There are indeed more stories to tell. Mark is linked with Egypt and the Coptic Church; others went east across into Persia; Edessa and Armenia were the first Christian states; and strangest of all, when the Portuguese arrived in India in the fifteenth century they found Christian there, the Mar Thoma Church – children of Thomas. A short time ago, on TV, Janina Ramirez was interpreting the magnificent Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral. She pointed out that Jerusalem was placed at the centre and from it radiated the three Christian continents – the then known world into which the gospel had spread. The eunuch symbolises, perhaps, this wider story. Luke may have been concerned with Rome, but he, like us must acknowledge that there are other stories, equally exciting and valid. It is a world church; not a western church.

### **The open gospel.**

The second point is to underline that the traveller was a slave and he was almost certainly black; and like many slaves, in particular those in positions of high trust and responsibility, a eunuch, which chained them closer to their masters. But, in the eyes of the Jewish law, a eunuch was a total outsider, beyond the pale. Deuteronomy stipulates that 'no eunuch is allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord'. (23.1) It is strange, therefore, that this eunuch should have been to Jerusalem to worship. Perhaps, having been attracted to the Jewish faith he had gone to Jerusalem only to find himself excluded and skulking on the fringes, longing to join in but not daring to. This brings us back to the Samaritans, for as we know 'the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans'. (John 4.9) Philip seems to be drawn to the outcasts!

The point here, however, is that, in the book of Isaiah, there is another text. The post-exilic prophet sees the possibility of the rebuilt Jerusalem as an open city in which all can find refuge, however demeaned or shunned.

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'.  
And do not let the eunuch say,  
'I am just a dry tree.'  
For thus says the Lord:  
To the eunuch that keeps my sabbath,  
Who chooses 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. (Isaiah 56. 3-5)

Had the eunuch been reading this passage? Was he, for Luke, the first-fruits of this prophecy? The gospel is about breaking down barriers so that, as Paul said, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus'. (Gal. 3.26) Or Jesus, quoting from the same passage in Isaiah, 'My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations'. (Luke 19.46; Isaiah 56.7)

This is a timely note to strike. On the road to Gaza – for us the focus of one of the longest running feuds - a black slave and a eunuch to boot comes centre stage. We need to hear this challenge at a time of widening divisions, of racism and nationalistic politics. These divisions and prejudices eat into the very heart not only of nations but of churches and even of ourselves; for we too participate in the sin of the world, even while our hearts crave the fulness of grace and love. Christ welcome everyone. There is no shame or stigma, weakness or supposed inadequacy that can separate us from the love of Christ. The Kingdom of heaven is open to all who would yearn for its coming. Can we enter, and be glad to find there people from all the ends of the earth? Would that the People of God were a finely tuned to the gospel of peace as we ought to be!

### **The Suffering Servant.**

Now we come to the passage that the eunuch was reading; the familiar Suffering Servant Song from Isaiah 53. Surely everyone will have Handel's Messiah in their head. 'He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.' For Christians this has been one of the key texts from the Old Testament, putting into memorable words the suffering and redeeming work of Christ.

Yet strangely, there is little use of it in the New Testament, compared with frequent references to the Psalms. This is the only place where it is explicitly quoted; elsewhere there are merely echoes and allusions. So why include it? Clearly it helps to flesh out Luke's frequent indication that the Messiah 'must suffer'. (Luke 24. 26 and elsewhere) But the eunuch has lighted upon it, I suggest, because he could identify with the suffering figure; one who, too, was a stranger and outcast, carrying heavy burdens yet without acknowledgement. But Isaiah was saying that this was the one through whom God acts, who is accepted by and dedicated to God. This God, as Philip would have pointed out, comes close to us in our dejection and despair. God in Christ draws near, in his frailty, bringing peace and strength.

We, too, can be thankful that, in Jesus, God comes near even in our suffering and anguish and fear and emptiness, one who is present in the depths. Of whom does the prophet write? Of the one who washed the disciples' feet.

No breath, without him, sorrow draws; no feet  
Wax weary, and no hands hard labour bear,  
But He doth wear  
The travail and the heat. (Laurence Housman)

### **Baptism and parting.**

The eunuch requests baptism. This chapter is one of the places where Luke fills out the meaning of baptism, first given in Acts 2, at Pentecost. Clearly, baptism has been part of Philip's exposition of the gospel. It is the natural next step. However, it is necessary to note that this follows immediately on from the odd story of how the Samaritans, having been baptised, needed the presence of Peter and James to complete it. There are several issues here but, I suggest, central to our story, is that baptism is a mark of identity, of belonging to a new community, the fellowship of the Kingdom, something like the 'fellowship of the ring'! Baptism is not an individual act, though it is highly personal; it is about family, about belonging to the Body of Christ through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As Peter says: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people'. (1 Peter 2.9) Through baptism the eunuch identified himself as part of that royal company, serving now a different master.

So, on the Gaza road, in the middle of the desert, where water is scarce and totally fortuitous, the moment is seized. This is going to be a short encounter. Philip is whisked away to new tasks; the eunuch returns to Ethiopia and the responsibilities and burdens of life in court. But he goes as a representative of a new people, who find in Jesus God's new Kingdom. Yet he is not alone. He has behind him the prayers and hopes of the People of God. If the rumours are true, it was indeed not in vain. Was this the seed of faith that still persists in that first Christian country in Africa?