

Philip, the Ethiopian, and the Good News of Inclusion - 10th October 2021

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[0 : 00] So over the last couple of weeks, we've been looking at some really familiar stories from the Bible and looking at them from different perspectives, which could change the way we look at them. And I think this is really helpful in general because it can offer a really rich and new way to look at things.

So last week, I don't know if you remember, Matt gave the example of the world map and how it looks different from different angles. I guess, you know, we all live in a world of photos and videos. So you can probably imagine that if you put things in different positions, they look different. I'm sure this man doesn't really fit into this lady's cap. Did you know that there are even some apps that you can use to edit the sky so you can look like you've got your perfect beach vacation, even if it rained every day?

And as we know, you can also edit pictures so that you can change the background and make you look like you're in places like you're not. I think these guys wanted to look like they were having an adventurous holiday, but unfortunately, Photoshop saw the better of them today.

And I think that's really true and really important in all of life. We're not God. We can't see everything and all time. We only see a small slice of the world and life.

[1 : 14] We don't have all the answers. We can't love or understand other people the way that God loves them because we don't have the time or space or perspective that God does. So we're going to think about different perspectives and we're going to focus on one story from Acts.

Now, I don't know if you know it. It's the story of the Ethiopian eunuch or the Ethiopian official. And it follows Philip, who we know as the evangelist or as a deacon.

It's not the same Philip in the Gospels. It's one of the hundreds of people following Jesus, probably one of the first seven who were appointed to share the good news in the early church.

Now, we meet Philip at what's probably a really stressful time in his life because Stephen, who was a really big, important preacher in the early church, had just been killed. And I think that the early Christians had just started to realise that they might get killed for sharing the good news.

So it must have been pretty scary to think, well, I've been appointed to share the good news at this point when you might be killed by the Roman authorities. So Philip gets this huge sense that God is leading him down this road to Gaza from Jerusalem.

[2 : 26] And he probably thought this is really strange because it's a wilderness road. It doesn't really go anywhere. And this is it now. So imagine what it must have looked like 2,000 years ago. And perhaps Philip thought maybe God was giving him permission to run away from everything.

I mean, that's why he could be called out into the wilderness. Or maybe Philip thought that it was time to die because there were a lot of bandits on the wilderness. Anyway, it must have taken quite a lot of courage and it must have felt very strange to be called in that direction.

And so the story we're going to look at today is from the book of Acts and it follows the life of the early Christians once Jesus has ascended and the Holy Spirit has come. And this is Philip sharing the good news in that.

And Acts is the sequel to the Gospels if you haven't heard of it. And this is from chapter 8. So here's a little clip from it. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. As a lamb before his shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who shall speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. You look to have fallen on hard times, friend.

[3 : 39] Indeed. And I have fallen hard. Do you need help? I've prepared a few wheels in my time. Thank you.

Please. The passage you were reading just now. My zire. Does it bring you comfort? I had hoped it would, but I am struggling to understand it. Does the prophet speak of himself or of someone else? He's talking of a man who knew great suffering and humiliation. A man who taught us that through faith we will find salvation in him. Who is this man? He is Jesus Christ.

The Son of God. Look.

[4 : 49] Water in the desert. Now what can stop me being baptized and taking the word of Jesus to the corners of the world? Do you repent your sins? I do. I do. I have looked past God.

I have been proud and I have been conceited. I have been an ambassador for violence and hate. That is past. What matters is who you now choose to be.

Are you ready? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the cross and rose again on the third day?

I do. I do. Then in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I baptize you.

Oh, so that's one particular version of it.

[6 : 10] The version I read in the Bible is more comic than that because it has the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot going along quite steadily. And then it has Philip running alongside it saying, do you understand what you're reading?

And then eventually the Ethiopian eunuch kind of pulls over and lets him in. And in case you're wondering, there's that strange flash at the end. It sort of says the Holy Spirit has taken Philip away. And this video chooses to interpret this as a kind of beam me up Scotty moment with a dramatic flash. But there are a range of ways of reading this. So when you have this passage of Philip talking to the Ethiopian eunuch, it's very standard to read it from Philip's perspective.

Perhaps you've heard lots of stories about evangelism and being ready to share the gospel in unexpected places. I know I've heard some sermons like that. But I think this story is really interesting if you look at it from the Ethiopian eunuch's perspective.

Now, Matt said I should explain what a eunuch is. I'm going to advise you to Google it, turn the images off. But basically, it's someone who's been castrated. Now, this Ethiopian eunuch is obviously a really complicated man.

[7 : 13] We're told he's the treasurer to Candace, who's the queen of Ethiopia. So the Ethiopian eunuch, who we never get a name for, is obviously really important. I guess a kind of Rishi Sunak of ancient Ethiopia.

A bit like we didn't get the name of the man in the Good Samaritan story. Because I think sometimes we don't get a name for the person who's the key for the story. And this Ethiopian eunuch or official is rich enough to have a carriage which is large enough to accommodate him and several scrolls of scripture, which were huge and expensive.

And I suspect that he probably had someone to drive him with all those scrolls. And it's 1,500 miles to and from Jerusalem so that he could worship in the temple, which is where he's just been.

I know the video shows him on the road on his own, but the text says he's reading. And the scrolls would have been so big. And I think we all know that reading and driving in dangerous roads don't mix very well.

So he must have been reasonably well off. I mean, imagine the cab fare even today. And he can obviously read in a number of languages if he comes from Ethiopia and he's reading the Hebrew scriptures. So he's a clever man and an important man.

[8 : 22] And he does this very strange thing. He chooses to come all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. Now, as a eunuch and as a Gentile and someone who wasn't a Jew, he wouldn't actually have been allowed into the middle of the temple.

He would just be allowed into this outer area in red, which in Jesus's time was the bit with all the markets in. He certainly wouldn't have seen any of the worship. He might have heard some of it or just seen the smoke coming out from the sacrifice.

He wouldn't have been able to go and stand in the central court like the normal Jewish men would. Or even get into this little bit, which isn't even in the main temple, which is where the Jewish women would have sat.

That's the court of women. Instead, we'd have had the Ethiopian eunuch being stuck in this outside kind of market area. And I just think that's amazing. This must be a man of extraordinary faith to travel thousands of miles to go into a space where he wasn't even allowed in and he faced extreme discrimination.

And I think he must have expected that because he knew his scriptures. We see him reading from Isaiah and it says in Deuteronomy 23.1, So I guess he was anticipating that.

[9 : 34] So the eunuch, when we meet him, is coming back from Jerusalem, coming back from the temple, and he's wrestling with the scriptures. And we see him reading part of Isaiah, which is chapter 53.

And the verse says, Now, Philip hears this passage and he hears it being read aloud.

And he says, like all good Bible teachers, do you understand what you're reading? And on a road full of bandits with no one about, it must have been a really strange question to hear from someone running alongside your coach.

But the eunuch takes it at face value and plays a very straight back and says, How can I understand it if there's no one to explain it to me? And invites Philip the stranger to hop onto his chariot and join him in wrestling with the scriptures.

And the eunuch asks, is the prophet describing his own calamity or someone else's? And I guess here the eunuch's doing theology as survival. He's reading a scripture from a place which excludes him in worship, but also speaks about a God who he has a huge need to be close to.

[10 : 57] The eunuch's trying to reconcile that amazing, loving God with an assembly, a worship place where he's unwelcome. It would seem that he's probably got himself and his situation in mind reading the text.

And perhaps what he's thinking about are his own experiences of castration and marginalization. Or thinking about his recent trip to the temple and his longing to take part in the worship, a longing which led him to travel thousands of miles and his exclusion from the space.

Here the eunuch's probably asking, is this me? Silent, excluded, humiliated. Now, if this is where Philip and the eunuch started off, then presumably they would have kept reading the book of Isaiah. Or at least, I like to think so, though this is now speculation. In the ancient scriptures, there weren't even spaces between the words, so they wouldn't have had chapter numbers in the same way that we would. So I imagine that they would have made their way to Isaiah 56, 3-5, which says, No stranger who has put trust in the eternal should ever say, I don't count.

I'm not part of the eternal's chosen people. And no eunuch should ever say, I am all dried up, worthless and empty. For this is what the eternal has to say.

[12 : 09] The eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths and make good choices and follow the terms of my covenant will blossom with my blessing and have an everlasting name. And I imagine Philip opening that bit of the scripture and saying, Look, this is you.

God loves you and can't be there to be separated from you. Whatever the world may say and whatever barriers people may put up in front of you and however unwelcome you may feel, that's the world, not God.

And then the eunuch asks, Well, how about now? Is there anything that would prevent me from being baptized? And I guess like me, if you've heard this passage before, you probably think the eunuch saying, How about right here, right now in this puddle?

Whereas actually, if you consider that the eunuch's just traveled so far to go and worship in a temple, he wasn't even allowed to enter fully. He's probably saying, Can I be one of the baptized? Or are you going to have rules which say, Not me? Will you accept me just as I am, just as broken as I am? Are people like me allowed to be Christians or will there be barriers there too?

[13 : 16] Now, acting with the Holy Spirit, God gives the answer through Philip and Philip baptizes the eunuch. And then the Holy Spirit takes Philip away because Philip's not important anymore.

Because that's done and Philip's role in this story is over. That's the weird flash we see in the video.

And the eunuch understands that he can be a Christian and be himself completely abundantly.

The eunuch doesn't need Philip's help anymore. And as one of the earliest believers in the Ethiopian tradition, I believe that the eunuch, because of where he comes in history and because of his position and his power, goes on to found the church in Ethiopia, which is one of the strongest and most faithful churches in the world.

So this is a really ancient church in Ethiopia, which they've literally carved out of the rock. It's like nearly 2,000 years old. It's absolutely amazing. I'd say that that might be the Ethiopian eunuch's doing.

He certainly had the status and the name to do it. And talk about a legacy which comes from a willingness to ask. That's quite an amazing achievement to build a church like that from someone who didn't feel welcome in the temple.

[14:27] Now, I guess that when we look at this passage from these two perspectives, and when we consider it from Philip's perspective, it's important to remember that God will sometimes encourage us to go into places that feel like barren wildernesses, or take massive detours or wild goose chases to places that don't feel like worth visiting on paper.

And that's because the places and people that God thinks are important and valuable aren't the same ones that get a lot of airtime in the world. They're often the kind of people you meet around the margins. And if we look at Jesus' life, it is mostly the marginalised and surprising and unexpected places that he gives us a vision of God in the most profound way.

Think about the woman at the well in Samaria. And this is a huge reminder that sometimes it's the journey or the unexpected encounter that's the destination. I don't know if you've ever felt like that, that you've gone somewhere, and then the really important conversation happened when you were having a fag or in the queue for the toilets.

And if you read this story from the eunuch's perspective, I think there's a really hopeful message. And this eunuch was just one stop on Philip's journey. For the eunuch, the key question was, am I allowed to come close to God and be one of the baptised, given my brokenness, my history, my identity?

And the answer we get is really clear from God, which is a thousand times yet. And yet, as you all know as well as me, not everyone feels welcome or worthy to be in church.

[16:05] Despite our own self-perception, that's not what matters. God sees us as we really are, as loved children of God. And I think this false perception that people have about themselves and whether they are worthy to be in a space is a huge problem, because people can't see themselves in the way that God sees them.

And so they think, I'm not clean enough, I'm not nice enough, I've done too many bad things, I'm too broken, unhappy, and traumatised to be in church. And sometimes it is really hard to believe that you're not too broken for God to love you, too unloved for God to love you.

I know I feel like that sometimes, inadequate for the life that God has somehow led me to. I just get lost in a mess of disorganisation, and it messes up my whole week. I think last week I was a whole day out the whole week.

I thought it was Tuesday on Wednesday, and therefore onwards. Sometimes I'm very quick to come back with a sarcastic remark, and I don't like that about myself. I look at these faults, and they can feel overwhelming, and I'm amazed that God can see past them.

And sometimes the temptation can be to hide it all and cover it up with a smile. But that's not the answer. Because when we push down hurt and pretend that the struggle doesn't exist, the hurt and the struggle can really own us, and it can define how we see ourselves and our impression of how God sees us.

[17:24] And this Ethiopian eunuch does an amazing thing. He's willing to be honest about his struggles and seek help. Writing a brave new ending in our life, like the eunuch lives, means that even when we don't want to, we need to ask the question, would I be welcome here?

Is there a future for me here? Have I done anything to exclude myself from this community? I think sometimes voicing those questions, if that's how you're feeling, is really important. Because if it's true that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, then that must somehow apply to how we live in our community now as well as in the future.

How we live out that means how we live out our own lives and accept other people under God. So there are some times when I feel really inadequate. I remember the day after I went to the ordination assessment panel, I was just completely down.

I'd completely sure I'd messed it up. I'd already sent like an eight-page letter, email to my bishop, explaining that because I'd already messed it up, what I was going to do next. And I was just weeping, really.

You can ask James about it. He says it's probably one of the worst weeks he's had. And I just felt I hadn't done what God expected me to do. I hadn't lived up to the person God wanted me to be. I

hadn't said the things that I knew I should say.

[18 : 40] And I'd really put my foot in my mouth sometimes. And I felt ashamed and despondent about it. And perhaps there are times when you felt ashamed or despondent or out of your depth or unworthy.

Perhaps there are some things that you've just done that play around your brain and go round and round and round and make you feel rubbish and inadequate. Or sometimes horrible life events come ahead and you can't see how you'll ever fix your broken heart or find a job or feel comfortable in your skin.

And yet, that isn't the message that we get in Christ. It isn't the message we see in the strange dinner parties that Jesus held with everyone from beggars and prostitutes to Pharisees and centurions and tax collectors.

It isn't the message we see in the God who touched lepers and heals them. God accepts the most wretched. God fundamentally is the great includer. The whole gospel is about redemption and grace, not exclusion.

The whole story in the Bible is a world made in love by a loving creator who sought time and again to make relationships with people who fell short or didn't believe themselves. I mean, consider Moses, who was terrified of standing in front of a crowd and had such a severe speech impediment that God needed to use his brother Aaron as an interpreter.

[19 : 57] God always chooses imperfect people somehow. We all are imperfect apart from Jesus and yet loved and longed for and included. Now, obviously, we don't always feel like beloved children of God.

I know I don't always feel like a beloved child of God. But that's the truth we need to be grounded in even on the darkest days and try and accept that. You and I are beloved children of God above and beyond any hesitations, any barriers that the world may put up, anything in your head.

So I don't know what you're going through this week or this morning. I know there are a lot of things that can feel like they get in the way. All kinds of scary things happening that can make it difficult to see the big picture like gas prices going up or universal credit cuts.

I'm guessing all of you experience insecurities and doubts and sometimes you might have a sense that you might not belong in church, that you might not be good enough to be here. There are certainly some people out there who don't come to church for those reasons.

And yet God longs for everyone to work through the things that hinder acceptance of God's love in life. So I guess what I'm asking today is what can we lay before God today that gets in the way of love and acceptance?

[21 : 10] What can we lay before God today which gets us in the way of seeing ourselves as God sees us? Because seeing ourselves as lovable and as loved children of God is a really important first step.

Only by loving yourself can you start to love other people properly. And only by understanding that God loves you and made you as you are can you start to welcome other people properly.

And I guess I think that's the message of the Ethiopian eunuch. He discovered the extent of God's love for him despite all the religious rules and social exclusion and discrimination that got in the way. He asked Philip and Philip revealed that God wanted him to be one of the most significant baptised Christians.

A man who previously hadn't even been allowed into the inner temple courts. So who might not feel good enough, pure enough to come to church today? How can we make ourselves and them realise that God wants them here whatever they've done and whatever they are?

And how can we ensure that people who think they are too unlovable or that they've got too much of a history are welcome and loved today?