

Central Content

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] I've been asked to tell you about this, just in case you hadn't noticed.

There it is. Bruce Waltke is a professor at Regent. He will do a simply superb job that you will remember for the rest of your lives if you ever get involved in it.

So I commend that downtown series to you. Today we're still going on from this story of the Ethiopian eunuch, of which a part was just read to us.

Now the great question is, where did I put my... Oh, there they are. We just about cancelled the meeting.

There it is. Talking about the central content of the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

[1 : 08] And just as a kind of preliminary to what... You all know this, but I'm going to tell you anyway.

This is the person. The Bible says the trouble with the world is right there.

If you can get to the inside of a person and correct the problem that is there, the willful rebellion against God that is there, then you will change the world.

But we happen to live in a world which says there's nothing wrong there. What's wrong is the environment in which this person is brought up.

And that's what's affecting him. And if you change the environment, you change the person. So you know that that's a long and contentious issue. And there's things to be said on both sides of it.

[2 : 13] But it's the problem that you... It's the problem that we have. And it's important. You see, what the scripture says at the heart of the problem is sin.

Sin is a breakdown in relationship to God. In order for mankind, the whole of humanity, to accomplish its purpose, the thing that has to happen is that sin has to be dealt with and the relationship restored.

Now, the fact is that that's... In our world, in the busyness of the downtown community, it's motivated by a concept of progress, which says that if we improve the environment in which people live, the education, the books they read, the places they live, all those things, then we will improve the people that live in it and we will have a super society here on Earth.

So let's get to it. And the other side of the story is that you won't change the world till you change the people in it. When you look at the advances that are made in medicine, the advances that are made in education, the advances that are made in public health, the advances that are made in all sorts of areas, you can't help but be thankful for the improved environment in which we live, but lots of people don't live in an improved environment.

And the reason still seems to be that you have to get at the heart of the problem. And that's why I remind you of the wonderful words of G.K. Chesterton, who said with great insight, the problem with the world is me.

[4 : 06] And that's a great moment to come to. You waste most of your time thinking that it's somewhere else and you're so little able to deal with it. Once you recognize where the problem is, you can start doing something about it.

Well, the next question is, what do you do about it? Now, you... This is what I want you to understand.

This is what you do about it. And this is what everybody does about it, see? You may not recognize this at first, but what it is, is this is an altar and this is a sacrifice, you see?

And at the center of most human religion is this business of the cult. And I remind you that cult is the word from which culture comes.

And we are a multi-cult society. We have a whole lot of cults. And the great discovery of the 20th century for a lot of people is that basically all the cults are just the same.

[5 : 13] And they probably are. And one wise man in the Globe and Mail this morning traces with wonderful precision the feast of Ramadan among the Muslims, the feast, the fast of Ramadan, the fast of Lent.

And he includes some midsummer fast that is marked by Buddhists. And he says, somehow the relationship to food has to do with finding God.

Whether you're a Buddhist or whether you're a Mohammedan or whether you're a Christian.

Wonderful conclusion he came to. And that was a cynical remark.

But that's the kind of thing that happens where a man writes about the three major religions of the world and never gives you any clue whether he belongs to any of them, either of them or none of them.

But that's what it is to be an objective scientist of the 20th century even in the realm of religion. So this is what you have. Now in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, you see that he was involved in the cult.

[6 : 29] He was up to Jerusalem because that was the center for the cult of Israel. That was where the temple was. That was where the altar was.

That was where the sacrifices were made. That was where the teaching was expounded on the basis of the continuation of the cult, which was controlled by the priests.

And he went up as a devout Jew, whether a proselyte or whether a Jew by inheritance, one of the black Jews of Ethiopia. Nobody knows where he came from exactly, but he was up participating in the cult.

Now all of us, to some extent, participate in a cult. Even though we may be very anti-cultural, we still have to create cults for ourselves.

Now we in the Anglican Church have one of the most magnificent cults in the whole of Christendom. That's my prejudice speaking. If there's a cult to belong to, I recommend it.

[7 : 34] But you all have your own, and you can go on with them. I'm not going to object. And they're not really very different. They are religious rituals, which we observe.

And you have to look at the cult in order to... I mean, it gives you some way of dealing with the questions that you can't answer in any other way.

Even a relatively pagan family, when a member of the family dies, they turn to the cult in order to have some ritual to go through to mark this tragic occasion in their life as a family.

And so we all have a kind of substructure of a cult that we can turn to, and into that cult is built most of the religious values we have.

And at the heart of it is the concept that I tried to show you on this page here, and that is that something, that there is some kind of connection between what we believe and the way we behave.

[8 : 50] Now, our society is trying very hard to get away from that and to say that... But to ignore, when the Bible says that Adam disobeyed God, then it also says that Cain slew Abel.

So when the relationship with God is broken, then the relationship between two brothers is broken. And so what we do is try and maintain a right relationship with God as a basis for the social relationship, the social contract in which we are all involved.

So that there is this kind of cultic experience at the basis of the whole of human existence. And the cultic experiences, perhaps, as I suggest, may not be very different.

When a fellow writes this editorial in the Globe and Mail this morning, all he's doing is looking at the cultic expression of Buddhism, the cultic expression of Mohammedanism, and the cultic expression of Islam and saying, so they're not very different?

And they aren't, you know, because they involve human beings, they involve the great unknown, they involve the response to the transcendent. So that in many ways, they're the same.

[10 : 10] And very often, there is some kind of sacrifice that is at the heart of them. And the human inescapable necessity of ritual, that morality has a source, that morality does not happen spontaneously among people.

Well, that's the cult. The second thing I want to talk about is this, and you can look at it in this way. Here you are.

And this is the commentary. Now, there happens to be, there happens to be a commentator, a commentator whose name is Isaiah.

Isaiah. And he comments on the significance of the cult. He says what it means. Isaiah is back in the 7th century B.C.

Isaiah is back in the time of a religious revival that swept all through the Mediterranean world and into the Far East. And much of the religion of the world as we know it has in some way a debt to Isaiah.

[11:42] So Isaiah is not a commentary, that there was a revival. When Isaiah discovered and announced to the world through the book that he wrote that the cult is not an end in itself, that it points to a reality greater than itself.

Now, that's very important for us, you see, because my responsibility, my job in a sense, and some people hold me to it very tight, is to maintain the Anglican cult at one parish in the city of Vancouver. So that we read the Bible, we observe the sacraments, we have the baptisms, we have the communion services, we know what to do when somebody dies, we know what to do when somebody is born, we know what to do in crisis, and so on.

We have a kind of cultic response, which we observe. Now, lots of people are even scrupulous to observe the details of the cult who have never seen the commentary as to what it means.

And countless numbers of people are fed up to their teeth with the cult and say, it doesn't mean anything. I've sung those hymns, I've said those prayers, I've gone to church, I've observed the rules, I've done all this, and it doesn't mean anything.

[13:07] So in a sense, they've abandoned the cult except for moments of crisis in their life. And the reason they've abandoned the cult is because they've never seen the commentary.

So what you have in this story is the Ethiopian eunuch going up to Jerusalem to observe the demands of the cult, to take part in the festivities, to hear the teaching, to put his life in order, to make connections with his roots and with his tradition, with his background, in a sense to find his spiritual roots and restore and renew them.

And he goes up there, but what does he come home with? He's riding back down from Jerusalem through Gaza into Egypt, up the Nile to north or south of Aswan, and he has with him the commentary.

He has brought with him the book of Isaiah so that it's a very dramatic moment, you see, when along comes Philip and says to him, do you understand what you're reading?

And he, and this is the way most people feel about their cult involvement, how could I understand it?

[14:32] Unless somebody explains it to me, I don't understand it. And that's the way that most people relate to the cultic observance of religion, no matter what religion it is.

They don't understand it. And so it is that Philip asks him, well, what is that thing you're reading? And what he does then, you see, is he, Philip tells him, or the Ethiopian eunuch, was reading at a particular place, and he was reading from the prophet Isaiah, and he was reading something that I think is very important.

I'm going to, in a sense, caricature it for you, but basically this is what he was reading. He was reading that there was a profound silence, and that silence was like to a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Didn't say anything. It just went along, not knowing what was involved. So there was a silence, as it turns out, in the face of the ultimate immorality, the murder of God.

And nobody said anything. Nothing was happening. There was silence. And then it says that there were rights abandoned, and justice denied.

[16:20] And this is, again, Isaiah the commentator, with the cult behind him, saying this is what it means. It's pointing to an event which is the fulfillment of the whole of the cultic practice of Israel.

that there will come a moment when there is a terrible silence, when God himself is murdered.

There will be, at the basis of it, a total humiliation.

And in that humiliation, justice will be categorically denied. And then, if you look at the Jerusalem Bible, it says that, it says, who can describe his generation?

But it's, it's, it was a kind of ignorance of the event. What it means, and the Jerusalem Bible, I think, captures it probably better, that what it suggests is that there is, that there wasn't, there wasn't anybody who understood what was happening.

The lawyers went on lawyering, the doctors went on doctoring, the engineers went on engineering, the teachers went on teaching, the merchants went on merchandising, the band played on.

[17 : 51] Even though this, which, in fulfillment of the cultic practice of the whole of humanity, according to the commentator Isaiah, was the central event of history, nothing happened.

And, at the heart of it, a life was cut short. And so, this whole thing, is, as you can see, it's about the cross.

And the reason that we take that commentary to be valid, is that in the New Testament, Jesus takes that commentary, to explain to his disciples, the inevitability of his own death.

That's why he says, of the cult, destroy this temple. And in three days, I'll build it again. This commentary, that Isaiah gives, for the whole world, is a commentary on the event that takes place, in absolute silence.

Justice is totally denied. Nobody talks about it. And a life is taken. There it is. And then, the Ethiopian eunuch, turns, to Philip, and says, about whom does this man speak?

[19 : 26] About himself, or about, some other man? And, you get the most amazing, reversal, that takes place, at that moment.

When, when it says, as you noticed in your text, Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, he told him, the good news of Jesus.

It's, it's a most amazing, uh, turnaround, you see. Because, this commentator, points to the darkest moment, in human history, when God is murdered, in silence, without justice, in total humiliation, without notice, or comment, by anybody.

It happens. The event takes place. And, uh, the, the Ethiopian eunuch says, I'll come. Who's he talking about?

And so, uh, it's good news. It's strange, you see, but, but here is, this is the heart, of, the New Testament message.

[20 : 50] It's not always, the heart of the life of the church, though it's doubtful, if the church is the church, when this isn't at the heart. But this is, this is, the gospel.

It's good, because, the cult, has been fulfilled. The cult has ended, in the sense of being a shadow, of something that was to come.

the thing that it shadowed, the thing that was foreseen by the shadow, which was the cult, is now fulfilled, in the death of Christ.

And, that in that, God has taken precipitate action, to deal with, the central problem of humanity, because, because, at the very point, at which, it was, entirely, within the purposes of God, to say, you are condemned.

He says, you're forgiven. And, those two can't be separated. You can't take them apart. And so, it's good, because sin is forgiven.

[22 : 02] And, it's good, because, when we read it, from the New Testament, we read it as, Jesus explanation, of his own death.

This is how Jesus, understood, his death. And, it's how we have, come, to understand, his death.

You know, because, you know, you know, as I do, that, when you, when you put the cross, by itself, people don't know, what to make of it.

They feel like, the Ethiopian unit. I can't understand this. What is this about? And, you can't understand, this event, unless you begin with, the cult.

You look at, the commentary. You discover, the event. You hear, the good news. All those things, have to come together, for you to understand, what our life, is meant to be.

The basis, of our life. Huh? When the worst, possible thing, has happened, the best, possible thing, occurs.

[23 : 19] They come together, at, at this point. Now, how does God, convert people then? Well, God, I think, draws people, into, a cultic, belonging, of some kind.

We can't escape that. Then, into that, he brings, the commentary, of Isaiah. The commentary, of Isaiah, points to the event, of the cross, and the event, of the cross, produces, the good news, of the gospel, and the good news, of the gospel, when heard, and understood, produces, conversion, and commitment.

There are, three, major, individual, conversions, in the book, of Acts. One is, Saint Paul, on the Damascus road, with a light, above the brightness, of the sun, struck down, from his horse, lying on the ground, blinded, and the risen Christ, speaking to him, and saying, Saul, Saul, why do you, kick against the, very dramatic, conversion.

There is, another, simpler, conversion story, of Cornelius, the Roman, centurion, and how Peter, came to him, in great, surprise, and told him, about Jesus, and he, and all his household, committed themselves, to the faith of Christ.

And then, there is this story. And this is a wonderful story, because, it, in heart, is marked, by no miraculous event. It's marked, by the recognition, of our cultic belonging.

[25 : 07] It's marked, by the necessity, of the biblical commentary, on our cultic belonging. It's marked, by, by, the understanding, which came, when Philip, bearing witness, to the gospel, took the cultic belonging, which this man had, in his going to Jerusalem, the commentary, which he had, in the scroll of Isaiah, and pointed him, to Jesus Christ.

And he was, he committed his life, to Christ, on that basis. And that's, how it works, basically. Most of us, would perhaps, prefer something, more dramatic, like St. Paul, to happen, perhaps, on the other end, of the Granville Bridge, on your way home tonight.

You know, the bang. But, you'll probably, find it's better, if you, perhaps, choose this, less dramatic way, and explore, the reality, of your own, of your own life, in the light, of the commentary, of Isaiah, as it leads to, the proclamation, of, the good news, which emerges, from, the worst, the worst possible, event, produces, the best possible news.

Just bow your heads, with me. Father, we, we're thankful, for this story.

A story, that takes us back, over centuries, and centuries, and centuries. A story, that encompasses, the whole, of experience, of mankind. A story, that in a sense, acknowledges, the whole, of human history.

[26 : 58] And a story, that bears witness, to the centrality, of the life, death, and resurrection, of Jesus Christ. And our Father, as, you provided, the cult, the commentator, you provided, the commentary, in the scriptures, and the teaching, of Philip, to bring this man, to faith.

So, in the individual, circumstances, of our lives, will you bring, us to faith, and enable us, to bring others, to faith.

We ask this, in Christ's name. Amen. I'm sorry, I was depending, on that clock, and I think, it's slow. I'm sorry, I was depending, on that clock, and I think it's slow. Thank you.