

Communion Sunday Evening

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 August 2011

Preacher: Rev Dr Malcolm Maclean

[0 : 00] We can turn back to the passage we read there from the book of Acts in chapter 9. I'd like to think about the last clause of verse 39.

Where we're told about the Ethiopian eunuch, that he went on his way rejoicing. That he went on his way rejoicing.

I suppose the first question that comes to mind is, who was the Ethiopian eunuch?

And some different reasons can be given an answer to that question. And some people say he was the first African to be converted.

And of course, they base that because he comes from Ethiopia. I'm not sure that is the case.

[1 : 33] Because in the structure of the book of Acts, it's normally an apostle that introduces a different race, as it were, into the church. And it looks at from subsequent chapters that, for example, with Cornelius in chapter 10, when Peter was instructed to go and preach to him, that Cornelius was actually the first Gentile to be brought into the Christian church.

So, it suggests to me, anyway, for what it's worth, that actually the eunuch was a Jew. And that he was going up to Israel to keep the Jewish feasts.

And, of course, we shouldn't be too surprised at that, because, as we know, the Jews have got a long-standing reputation for being involved in finance.

And here was this particular eunuch. And as we can see from verse 27, he was in charge of all the treasure of this queen of Ethiopia.

So, not that it makes much difference to what we think about him, but it looks to me as if this was a Jew from Ethiopia that had come up to keep one of the feasts in Israel.

[3 : 04] Of course, today he is, nobody knows his name, but today he is credited with being the one who started what's known as the Abyssinian Church.

And whether he did that or not, nobody knows. But one thing is certainly true, that if he did find it, he'd be very disappointed with the way it's turned out.

Because it doesn't give the place to Jesus that this particular passage gives. So, that's just one or two details about the Ethiopian himself.

Now, the phrase that we are looking at, when on is we're rejoicing, it kind of suggests, doesn't it, that prior to him meeting Philip, he wasn't rejoicing.

That whatever else may have been said about the man as he made his journey, that he wasn't marked by joy. That is, until he met Philip.

[4 : 18] But then, after he met Philip, he was full of joy. And he went on his way rejoicing. And that's the two things I want us to think about.

Why was this man not joyful before he met Philip? Because he had plenty of reasons that we might think would have made him happy.

And we'll just look at some of these reasons. Because I'm sure that perhaps some of us would think the same things would make us happy.

So, look at some things about his life, firstly, that did not provide happiness or satisfaction for him.

And then, secondly, we'll look at what did make him happy.

Why did this man go on his way rejoicing? One thing that's fairly obvious about his rejoicing is he didn't need Philip to stay with him. Philip leaves him.

[5 : 24] And yet, the Ethiopian is full of joy. So, something remarkable has happened to this man that makes him happy, content, to journey by himself down to Ethiopia.

So, firstly, what are some things about this man that might have made him happy, satisfied with life, but which didn't?

Well, he's just been on a journey, hasn't he? He's had the opportunity to travel, to explore other societies.

To make a journey to an important place. He has had this time up in Israel in which he could just discover what life was like in another society.

But it didn't give him any satisfaction to do that. But lots of people today seem to think it would have. That they like to travel.

[6 : 48] To find out what others are like. What life is like in other parts of the world. To increase their knowledge of other societies. And so on. But this man would say to such, discovering that kind of thing doesn't satisfy your soul.

Seeing the beauties that exist in other countries doesn't provide inner comfort. That's one thing you can stroke off the list for not making him happy.

The second thing we can measure in the list that this man tried in order to find satisfaction is he went to a big religious gathering.

He went up to Israel. To keep one of the national feasts. To keep one of the national feasts.

And there he would have met thousands of other people engaged in the same thing. There he was taking part in the worship of God.

[7 : 56] And he's no doubt the sense of awe that would have been in all the meetings connected to that occasion would have been very impressive.

We can imagine the man listening to all the thousands of people as they sing songs of praise to God. We can imagine him watching all the activities that take place in the temple and all the splendor connected to it.

And yet as he comes away, his heart is empty. This man tells us that religion doesn't satisfy.

He tells us that going to a religious occasion in which there are thousands and thousands of people, in which there are thousands of people in which there are thousands of people in which there are thousands of people in the world.

There is a lot of people in which there is great splendor about it all. And yet this man's heart is still empty.

[9 : 17] You know, and there's many people, and perhaps some are here, who imagine that religion will satisfy their heart.

And they may not go to the extent that this man did and travel to another country in order to take part in a religious service. But they do take part in a religious service where they are, and they may get fully involved in it.

And if that is you, just think of this question. Is your heart satisfied?

After taking part in your religious activities, are you going on your way rejoicing? As people meet you, would they say it about you, that you are a satisfied person?

That in your heart you have something that ensures you don't need anything else? This man, he had tried it.

[10 : 36] And he's coming away from Jerusalem. And he's disappointed, I think. He'd have gone up there with great hopes.

If he was a Jew, he'd have heard about many accounts that others would have given of what they had experienced when they had gone there. But alas, he himself is heading back.

Going back to Ethiopia. And he's going back with an empty heart. Perhaps you've come to this communion.

And are you leaving it with an empty heart? That's very sad.

Something else we can say about this man, which we may find very surprising. And that is that the fact he was reading the Bible on this occasion did not give him joy.

[11 : 46] We would have said, with our knowledge of the Bible, that he was reading the best passage possible.

He was reading Isaiah 53. And we know the amazing way that Isaiah 53 provides all the details that there are about the suffering of Jesus.

But as we can see from the story, this man is confused. Merely reading the Bible, in the sense of just reading the Bible, did not satisfy his heart.

Of course, it's very important to read the Bible. And I am not suggesting for a moment that people shouldn't. But I suspect that most of us, if not all of us, have read the Bible today.

And since you have done that, can I ask you, is your heart satisfied? Do you have joy because you've read the Bible?

[13:13] The Bible itself is a source of joy. There's no doubt about that. But here's this man. He's reading the Bible.

He's reading a very appropriate passage. And yet, there's something missing. And therefore, until Philip comes on the scene, this man has no joy.

His heart is empty. What else can we say about him? This Ethiopian, as he makes his way down to Ethiopia.

Well, he's going home. He's going back to all the familiar faces. He's going back to those that he knows well. And of course, we know, don't we, that that home's a place we like to be.

It's good to go home after being away from it. You know, but sometimes there's things in life that come into us that our homes can't provide.

[14:30] And here's this man, and he's going home. He's left his home, whoever he stayed with.

He's left his home. He left it with an empty heart. And he's going home with an empty heart. I'm sure he thought that when he went up, when he left home, to go up to Jerusalem, that he would come back a different man.

That after he had gone up to Jerusalem and taken part in all the activities there and the worship services at the temple and so on, that if he had gone up there, he would find God.

And yet here he is, and he's on his way home. And he's going home with an empty heart. How are you going to go home tonight?

You've come to the right place. We're thinking about a Bible passage. Perhaps you came here hoping to go home different.

[15:47] Perhaps you've done that many times before. You've come out to church, and there was something in your heart that said to you, I wish I could find what I hear these people speaking about.

I wish I could find it for myself and my own heart. And you've come, and you've heard the Bible read, and it remained a puzzle to you, and you've gone home still with an empty heart.

Well, here's this man going home with an empty heart. Home can't satisfy our deepest longing.

What else about him? Well, he's a man with a very good job. He's going back to Ethiopia to resume his role there.

He's the man in charge of all the treasure of that country. He's the equivalent of George Osborne, the chancellor of the Exchequer.

[16:58] We would say if there was anyone that was satisfied with his career, it should be this Ethiopian. He has climbed a ladder.

He has climbed a ladder right to the top. He probably can't get any higher. And yet, as he looks down from the top of his ladder, he looks down with an empty heart.

Perhaps this man has lived for his career. And what has his career given him?

It's given him a place in society, certainly. But what has it given his heart? His heart is empty.

And in this particular regard, he's a picture of the 21st century person, isn't he? How many millions are trying to find the meaning of life in their work?

[18:10] And they dedicate themselves to getting to the top of the ladder. And when they get to the top of the ladder, their heart is as empty at the top as it was at the bottom.

Work, no matter how dignified, no matter how important.

And of course, some work's roles in life are essential, obviously, and not suggesting anything negative about them. But all I'm saying is this.

If you live for your work, you'll have an empty heart. That's what this man discovered. There was a man once called Henry Martin.

And he was a genius. He got a double first from Cambridge. You know what he said about it?

[19:29] He said when he had climbed to the top, he found he had grasped a shadow. And he went away to be a missionary in Persia.

And found satisfaction there. What else about this Ethiopian? Well, who are the people he knows?

Well, he knows the people at the top. He's in touch with the queen of the Ethiopians. He spends his time in the company of significant people.

He knows all the celebrities of his country. Anybody, it's anybody.

This Ethiopian knows them. He's known them for a long time. And despite all their position in life, all their accomplishments, these celebrities of Ethiopia, they have not given anything to this man's heart.

[20 : 55] And he's going back to them with an empty heart. No matter how gifted they are.

No matter how many of them there are. No matter how royal they are. This man still has an empty heart.

And if he speaks for 21st century people in his attitude to being at the top of the ladder, how much more does he speak to 21st century people who imagine if they just knew so-and-so, and that if they could become a friend of so-and-so, that they would find meaning in life.

But they don't. You like this man? This man from Ethiopia 2,000 years ago?

This man who tried a religious event? Heart was empty. This man who was reading the Bible?

Didn't understand what he read?

[22 : 21] And his heart was empty. This man who had a very important role in life? His heart was empty. This man who knew all the movers and shakers of his country?

Yet his heart was empty. What did this man need? That would make him go on his way rejoicing?

Well, this chapter tells us. So we'll go on secondly to think about that. What made this man so happy that he went on his way rejoicing?

Of course, this man is a seeker. He's seeking for God, isn't he? He's searching for God.

But he's realizing in a way that the fact that he is searching is actually not getting him anywhere.

[23 : 27] But as he listens to Philip, something else comes, I think, into his mind. And he realizes that when this total stranger appears at his chariot, and this total stranger who has the answer to his longing soul, it must have crossed his mind that not only was he searching for God, but God was searching for him.

He, as he went through his various experiences, actually discovered that he didn't know where God was.

He thought he would be in Jerusalem, but he wasn't there. But as he makes his way through the desert, the desert of all places, he actually discovers that God knows where he is.

And right there in the desert, God sends to him exactly the person he needs to hear. And this man realized something stupendous, that the God of heaven, whom he was eagerly wanting to know, that this God was searching for him.

And that this God could come and speak to him in a place where he would be totally unexpected, in the desert that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

[25 : 17] And there, this Ethiopian eunuch discovered that God knew where he was. I want to say that to you.

God knows where you are. He knows where you are in every way. He knows your heart. This God sees beyond your face.

We can put lots of things on our face. And we can use that to hide who we are. And behind many a smiling face is an empty heart.

But the good news is God knows your heart. God knows where you are. And this man discovered that.

And I think that's a great encouragement. God knows where you are. God knows how to get to you.

[26 : 33] Philip, as we had read the previous part of chapter 8, was up in Samaria and he was preaching to the Samaritans there.

And then the Lord told him to go down to Gaza and to speak to this total stranger. and he went over to the chariot as God told him to do and began to speak to the Ethiopian and asked him what he was he knew he was reading Isaiah 53 and he asked the Ethiopian do you understand what you're reading?

You know, that's a very important question to ask when we see someone reading the Bible. You know, sometimes we can see people reading the Bible and we can assume that they're getting benefit from it.

But it's a very important question to ask. Do you understand what you're reading? And of course, asking that question opened the door for the answer the man gave and the man right away confessed his ignorance.

How can I unless someone guides me? And he asked Philip to the chariot and to sit with him and as we know this says there in verse 35 Philip opened his mouth and began to speak about the good

news about Jesus.

[28 : 02] And you know, that's what made all the difference to this man. This is why he went on his way rejoicing. He now understood the mission of Jesus Christ. As the words tell us, he was like a lamb, he was led to the slaughter and like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before it shears his silence, he opens not his mouth and so on.

As Philip explains to him why Jesus Christ was in such a place. I mean, we know it's Calvary he's talking about. We know he's there taking the place of sinners.

We know he is being slaughtered. And of course that is the image. He's being slaughtered. We know that he is being slaughtered because he's taking the place of sinners that he bore their punishment.

This man's empty heart existed because he was a sinner. That is why our hearts are empty. In our hearts there's a space that only God can fill.

And the only way by which God is going to fill it is when we understand who Jesus is. When we understand what Jesus did. And this man we can imagine him sitting there in his chariot and he hears about what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem.

[29 : 28] Of course he's just been to Jerusalem. Jerusalem. But merely going to Jerusalem didn't help him. But when he hears what Jesus did at Jerusalem joy comes in his heart.

He hears the message of liberation. He hears the message that he can be set free from the power of sin in his life. He hears he can be pardoned all the wrong things he has done.

He hears everything of what Jesus has done for people. And as he hears understands the message about Jesus Christ this man's heart begins to be full of joy.

And of course the obvious question that comes to us is this. when we hear about Jesus what happens to our heart?

It's a very important question. When we hear about Jesus what happens to our heart? does the understanding of knowing what he did on the cross does it fill us with joy?

[31 : 01] Go through the book of Acts next time you have a chance to do so and just note the number of times it refers to joy. The outcome of the gospel is joy.

There's bound to be joy if your sins are forgiven. There's bound to be joy when a person grasps that he or she has been pardoned.

There's nothing in life and all the things we mentioned earlier this man had there's nothing in life that can give the joy that's like the joy of forgiveness.

And this man experienced it in his heart as he sat there in his chariot in the desert and he was full of joy. Are you full of joy?

joy? You were made to be joyful you know that. Your heart has got the capacity for immense joy.

[32 : 22] The only problem is quite often sadly we don't go to the source of joy to have the joy. And there's only one source and that's Jesus himself.

This man who a few minutes before this and note how quickly it happened. This man who a few minutes before this is confused is going back to his country disappointed because he hasn't found what he's looking for.

Here he is now a few minutes after hearing about Jesus Christ and as his mind opened to grasp it all his heart is full of joy.

Now you may have come in this building tonight and you may have come in it similar to this man disappointed confused about religion even the Bible not making sense to you but the amazing thing is you can leave the building having grasped the message of the Bible and going out with your heart full of joy because you appreciate your being forgiven.

This man this man knew a lot about names didn't he? He knew a lot about the names of the important people in Ethiopia but as we can see from verse 36 he's discovered the most important name and that comes out in his request to be baptized.

[34 : 30] We could have asked him before Philip says to him met him who are you man from Ethiopia who are you? And he would say I am the chancellor of the exchequer in Ethiopia having heard about Jesus and had explained to him what Jesus did we can ask him a question again who are you now man from Ethiopia and he would tell us I want to have on me the name of God and as he gets he asked Peter there so he asked Philip there to baptize him and that's him making his personal dedication to living for the God whom he has heard about and he wants this I'm sure he had an entourage with him being such an important person and as they watch their important figure

publicly identifying himself with this

God that they've just heard this stranger Philip speaking about and as they watched this eunuch getting baptized they were seeing this man confessing he now belonged he now served a different master he served God and he was willing delighted pleased to make this public declaration that he now belonged to him you know that's what the gospel does it's got this powerful effect that it makes those who understand it want to make it public this man did that right away when's the best time to tell others that the gospel's been blessed blessed the best time to tell others that the gospel has been blessed to you is to tell them right away this man as they were we can put it this way he nailed his colors to the mass he went down to

Ethiopia and all those who were with him they knew he was a different person he did not hide it and that's why he's joyful what's going to stop joy after a person's been converted what's going to stop joy after a person's been converted the joy will go if Jesus Christ doesn't have the first place this man has grasped right away this very important feature that Jesus must be confessed and because he confessed Jesus he went on his way rejoicing he's going home and what a message he's going home with he had initially thought he's going to go home the same person but now he's going home a different person he's going back to whoever he lived with and he's got this marvelous message for them that it is possible to know

Jesus Christ the one who came into the world to die on the cross and to have the joy of the Lord in your heart he's going back to tell them he's going back to tell all the people in Ethiopia the queen and all the rest of the officials around around her that he has found a treasure far greater than the treasure he looks after for her what a wonderful journey home he had we're not told what effects he had when he got back there but all we're told about him is he went on his way rejoicing because Jesus now dominated his life as we come to the end of the service and as we go out on our way are we going on our way rejoicing you know we've seen

Jesus today we've seen a picture of Jesus that this man hadn't seen up until this moment we have thought about his marvelous achievements on the cross we have thought about the deliverance he gives to those who trust in him we have thought about the marvelous pardon he provides and surely we should be full of joy joy of being liberated this man had it went on his way rejoicing because he's trusting in Jesus I hope all of us are trusting in Christ because let me tell you this it's the only way to experience the joy that God can give so trust in Jesus and God bless these thoughts to us do amen to hope and hear an peace of laughing and love to our vive■■■■■ andmm toove history and amazing and here this about our web our session going