

Sermon for 2nd May 2021, by Josh Richards, Ordinand
Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8

Despite being born just outside Birmingham, I spent the best part of two decades growing up in Scotland. But- perhaps because of the peculiar dynamics of growing up English in Scotland- I failed to pick up the accent. Whenever I say that, I feel like to apologise to all those hoping to detect some evidence of an Edinburgh lilt. So that's why I cherish the memory of those rare moments when someone asks me "is that a blended accent?"

In this throwaway question someone indicates that they hear something- anything! - more than 'generic, posh, English' in my voice. Now, of course, I am posh and English in a generic sort of way. But that question, rather mundanely, recognises the presence of something else. They have paid attention and heard something.

Willie Jennings, in his brilliant commentary on Acts, writes that:

"Sometimes being seen as a friend or enemy of a people depends on whether you listen to their story and then live your life as though their story matters to you."

Jennings highlights that the action in Acts 8 is driven by questions.

Philip asks the eunuch:

Do you understand what you are reading?

The eunuch asks Philip:

How can I unless someone guides me?

The text from Isaiah that the eunuch is reading asks:

Who can describe his generation?

Upon reading Isaiah, the eunuch asks of Philip:

Who is this person in pain and suffering? About whom does the prophet say this?

And finally, the eunuch asks:

What prevents me from being baptised?

Each question pays attention to something- another person, the challenge of Scripture, the good news.

And notice that we are on the road again. In fact, Luke seems to want to highlight the parallels between the events of the Emmaus Road that we explored last week and these events.ⁱ

In both, strangers ask travellers, coming from Jerusalem, about what they are already reading or discussing. In both, the strangers explain scripture to them, demonstrates that it points to Jesus. In both, the travellers urge the strangers to travel with them. In both, the encounter ends with something the church now calls a sacrament and the stranger suddenly disappears.

Perhaps Luke wants us to see in these journeys a pattern for discipleship: what is to live Jesus-shaped lives in the light of the resurrection. Discipleship is always on the move: towards God and each other.

And encounter happens because the Spirit speaks. "Go over to this chariot and **join** it."

We might not literally be chasing after chariots but in some sense, disciples are always on the road from Jerusalem, urged by the Spirit into surprising encounters.

The Spirit is always calling us closer, to be joined to one another. The call is universal but never general. It is always to the particular: to *these* people, to *this* chariot, to *this* place. The Spirit calls us to get close, to ask questions of- and be questioned by- particular people and particular circumstances.

So, who is this particular person whose life the Spirit leads Philip to interrupt? What questions might he ask of us?

As a court official, he is clearly powerful. Able to afford a scroll of Isaiah, he is clearly wealthy. Having travelled a long distance to Jerusalem, he is clearly devout.

And yet he is a eunuch. And yet he remains a gentile. As a eunuch he would be unable to convert, unable to enter into the Temple. He is caught, drawn to love a foreign God but prevented from joining his people.

And so, I wonder why he was studying this particular passage from Isaiah.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.

I wonder if he recognised something here.

About whom does the prophet say this? Who is this one like me?

Or perhaps, the question is asked less by the gentile outsider and more by the wealthy civil servant.

About whom does the prophet say this? Who is this pitiful creature? Why does Isaiah include this story of defeat?

Or perhaps, it is both and more: recognition and longing mingled with confusion and revulsion and sincere scholarly interest.

About whom does the prophet say this?

I wonder how you would have asked that question. I suspect most of us would recognise those different impulses. Certainly, many of us here will be used to exercising agency, comfortable with different forms of power, comfortable with comfort. But so too will many of us be familiar with being silenced, humiliated, robbed of justice. Each of us has been raised by power and its absence, pain and its absence. We speak with blended accents.

About whom does the prophet say this?

And so, in the space opened up by Scripture and the Spirit, between suffering and success, Philip begins to speak. And when he's finished, the eunuch asks another question, another ambiguously accented question.

Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?

This might be:

This is amazing! I want in! There's water, let's do this now!

Or it might be:

I've heard this before. What's the catch? What aren't you telling me that stops me from joining in?

Or maybe it's both.

The eunuch knows that there might actually be something preventing him and us from joining this good news. Further down the road, as we are, it is easy to lose sight of this. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that we were outsiders with no birth-right to this story. We forget the unlikeliness of our adoption.

In saying he is the true vine in John 15, Jesus is drawing on a common image in the Old Testament used to refer to Israel. Jesus is, therefore, making quite a specific claim: that he fulfils what Israel is called to be. And yes, in doing so, he opens up the possibility for everyone to abide in his love, but he does so from a particular place and within a particular people with a particular story. Jesus' immediate audience are Jews. God speaks with a Nazarene accent.

Those of us who are gentiles join this story on roads leading out from Jerusalem. By grace we are *grafted in*, to use Paul's language when he considers how gentiles now relate to this vine.

If we're honest, we don't like this. I certainly don't! I want to be the start and focus of the story. I would rather have earned my place. I would rather be owed something by God.

And so, we can be tempted to minimise this grace that grafts and joins. Left unpruned, branches like us begin to imagine that it is something other than Jesus that makes us or the church or another group special. Before we know it, our branch is being tended in such a way where it does not abide in the true vine.

I waste so much energy kidding myself that I deserve this or that, that something I have done merits what I have been given. And in my neediness and fragility I bristle at anyone or thing that threatens the façade. And when a group of us get together and decide that a particular thing makes us special, we try and organise the world around that thing. We don't have to look far to see the strange fruit of these kinds of plants.

And even when I hear the cry of the Spirit, I'm still scared. I'm still weak. Quite frankly, there was a nice bit of the road back there that looked much safer. But:

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

We can join one another because we are joined. We chase after chariots because Jesus has chased after us. Jesus has joined us.

In John, our saviour says:

You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you.

You have already been cleansed. *God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.* (1 John 4:15) Jesus has claimed us. He abides in us. And we abide in him when we live life as if that is true. What would it look like to live in *this* place with *these* people as if that were true?

And we know that it is true because:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
he did not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
...For his life was taken away from the earth.*

Jesus joined us in our pain and brokenness, even to the point of death, so that we might join him in true life. Whether Jew or gentile, man or woman, slave or free, we are cleansed, emerging from the water as one body.

And we are not sent out alone- or even just with one another. We join the resurrected Jesus on the road. Apart from him we can do nothing but with him, *in him*, we will bear fruit.

As we approach his table, may we know ourselves joined to and by our Lord. And may we be caught up in the work of his Spirit on the road.

Amen.

ⁱ In his commentary, Craig Keener highlights the following parallels. Why do you think Luke does this? Are there other parts of the Bible either of our passages remind you of?

Jesus in Luke 24	Philip in Acts 8
Begins traveling with two disciples on (Emmaus) road (Luke 24:15)	Begins traveling with God-fearer on road (Acts 8:29; road specified in 8:26)
Jesus opens the conversation with a question (Luke 24:17)	Philip opens the conversation with a question (Acts 8:30)
Jesus asks about what they are already discussing (Luke 24:17)	Philip asks about what he is already reading (Acts 8:30)
Jesus explains the Scriptures to them (Luke 24:27)	Philip explains this Scripture and others to him (Acts 8:35)
Jesus explains Scriptures "beginning with" Moses and the prophets (Luke 24:27)	Philip explains Scripture "beginning from" this passage in Isaiah (Acts 8:35)
Jesus explains that his <i>death</i> and resurrection were God's plan (Luke 24:14, 18-27)	Philip begins with Jesus's passion (Acts 8:32-33)
They urge him to stay with them (Luke 24:29)	He invites Philip into his chariot (Acts 8:31)
Jesus vanishes (Luke 24:31)	Philip is snatched away, and the eunuch no longer sees him (Acts 8:39)