

## Acts 8:26-40: A Sermon

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I think some people may be surprised to find a story about a black African in the New Testament. The Ethiopian in the story we read this morning may be the only black African in the New Testament, but we can't really be sure of that. There may be others who are not identified as such. People in the ancient Mediterranean world were not much concerned about skin colour, and we can't expect them ordinarily to point it out. We only know that the man in our story was black because he came from Ethiopia. Luke writing this story is not interested in his skin colour, but he is interested in his home country.

So, first of all, a little bit of historical geography. The term Ethiopia was used in a very broad sense: it meant more or less everywhere south of Egypt. It included the territory we now call Ethiopia, but our Ethiopian actually came from an area we would call northern Sudan. He came from the kingdom of Meroe, and we know that because Luke tells us he was a high-ranking court official, in charge of the treasury of queen Candace. Candace is not a personal name but a title, rather like the term Pharaoh for the kings of Egypt. In the kingdom of Meroe Candace was the title of the queen mother, probably when she was acting as the regent on behalf of a son too young to rule. So her treasurer was a really important man, as we can also tell from the fact that he is riding in a chariot. In the ancient world, most people walked, wealthy or important people rode donkeys or horses, only very important people were transported in a chariot.

I think Luke probably had a couple of reasons for telling us this story. You may remember, at the beginning of Acts, Jesus tells the apostles that they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. For ancient people the ends of the earth were not abstractions. They were the furthest places they knew in each direction: India to the east, Spain to the west, Scythia on the Russian steppes to the north, and Ethiopia to the south. Now in Luke's narrative of the spread of the Gospel across the world he knew, the Gospel never actually reaches any of these ends of the earth (it may well have done in fact, but Luke doesn't tell the story) except in the case of Ethiopia. When the Ethiopian eunuch, now a Christian, continues his journey at the end of Luke's story, he is on his way to the southern end of the earth. When I visited Ethiopia myself (I mean the country we call Ethiopia) I was living at the time in Scotland, and I told people in Ethiopia that I had come a long way, from one end of the earth to another.

So the story is a little foretaste of the goal of the Christian mission to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, which otherwise lies still in the future. But it is significant for another reason: the Ethiopian is the first Gentile, in Luke's narrative, who becomes a Christian. You might wonder whether he isn't in fact a Jew. He's been to worship in the temple in Jerusalem and he's reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The fact that he's a black African doesn't mean he can't be a Jew. Judaism was not racially exclusive. Almost anyone could become a Jew and lots of people did. But he Ethiopian could not because he was a eunuch. Even a born Jew who was a eunuch would be excluded from the temple in Jerusalem, as were people with other major bodily defects. The Ethiopian had visited the temple, but he would have had to stay in the outer court, where Gentiles were allowed.

So isn't this rather remarkable, at least from our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective? The first Gentile to join the company of the early Jewish Christians was a black African. We've heard a lot just recently about racism and diversity in the church. This story makes us realise that the Christian church was ethnically diverse from the very beginning. Diversity is in the church's DNA. Even way back in the prophets in the Old Testament we can see that that was God's intention for his people. And Philip the evangelist, directed by an angel to this remote place on the road to Egypt, knew very well that the Ethiopian's colour or race was no problem at all.

The Ethiopian couldn't actually become a Jew, but he was clearly one of those many Gentiles who were attracted to the Jewish faith and worshipped the God of Israel. He was obviously very serious about his faith. Of all the people who went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem from all over the known world, his journey would have been one of the longest. It would probably have taken at least a month in each direction. And, since he had the luxury of being driven in a chariot, he's putting his journey to the best possible use by reading one of the Jewish scriptures. Like most people he was reading aloud, and that's how Philip starts a conversation.

Fortuitously – or, surely, providentially – the Ethiopian is reading chapter 53 of Isaiah. It's the mysterious passage about the suffering servant of God, who is punished for no fault of his own but bears the sins of many others, like a sacrificial victim. It is by no means obvious who this figure is supposed to be. He doesn't look at all like the messianic king promised for the future. So it is not surprising the Ethiopian is puzzled. But it is a great opportunity for Philip to tell him about Jesus. This enigmatic story fits the story of Jesus like a glove. I imagine that Philip would have gone on to show the eunuch that, just three chapters later in Isaiah, God promises both the foreigner and the eunuch that in the coming restoration of Israel they will be welcomed into the people of God.

We don't know how long the conversation went on, but you may be surprised at how soon it results in Philip baptising the Ethiopian. Nowadays we should expect someone asking for baptism to go through a course of preparation, in which they learn about the Christian faith and what identifying as a follower of Jesus means. I suspect the reason not too much of that was required of the Ethiopian is that he understood so much of it already. He worshipped the one and only God, the God of Israel; he practised many of God's commandments; from the scriptures he knew quite a lot about God's purposes. He only needed to learn about Jesus and everything slotted into place. Jesus was clearly the one to whom all the scriptures pointed, the promised saviour. Believing in Jesus would for him have seemed the natural next step to take, as it may have been for Philip and for many of the early Jewish Christians. Had he been a pagan he would have had to renounce a lot and learn a lot. But as it was he wasn't adopting a new religion. He was going the way the faith he already had was pointing him.

It's worth remembering sometimes how much of what we believe as Christians is already there in the Old Testament. That's why it was the Bible of the early Christians, before there ever was a New Testament. They read the Jewish scriptures alongside, of course, the teachings of Jesus and the stories about Jesus as these were known in oral form, but the Jewish scriptures were indispensable for understanding Jesus. They still are. I know that many Christians have problems with the Old Testament. We need to wrestle with those problems. But we shouldn't give up. The Old Testament is not some antiquated relic of a dead religion. It is not about some other God than the God of Jesus. It tells us about the God of Jesus and it tells us about Jesus. We need it no less than the Ethiopian did.

So this story can tell us something about ethnic diversity in the church. It can tell us something about the importance of the Old Testament. But thirdly and finally, it is worth reflecting on the last we hear of the Ethiopian: "he went on his way rejoicing." We don't know how he was feeling earlier in his journey, but the difference his faith and his baptism made was joy. There is a lot in the New Testament (actually in both testaments) about joy. In Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit, joy comes second in the list after love: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness (and so on). "Rejoice in the Lord always," he tells his readers. Of course, joy isn't something we can manage by trying.

I guess most people have found the past year a rather joyless time. For some people it has been very painful, a time of loss and grief. For others it has an anxious and wearisome time, a time to be endured like a prison sentence. But most people can also remember moments of great joy, joy all the more poignant because it welled up in us in the midst of a pandemic.

For example, so many found solace and inspiration in fresh contact with the natural world. Why did birdsong mean so much to some of us? Because it reminded us of a world beyond the pandemic, a sphere in which the joy of being alive in God's world could still be felt. Or, for many people, although our social contact was so restricted in lockdown, somehow we realised just how precious to us were the times of converse with loved ones and friends that we did have. Joy in the relationships we most value flourished in a time of social famine.

The joy that we have in Jesus Christ can be like that. In times of pain and grief and problems, it doesn't remove the suffering or the unhappiness. But like hearing birdsong during lockdown, we can be reminded that beyond what we are going through there is the love of God, that in Christ we are held in God's love, and the love of Christ can be a wellspring of joy that is more wonderful when it comes to us from God in difficult times.

That takes us some way from the Ethiopian, who was not going through a difficult time, but he was returning to a life from which he had been away for months, a changed man in the same old circumstances. If he was to be a witness to Jesus it would be his newfound joy that would make a difference.