

Thought for the Day 2nd May 2020 – Acts 8: 26 – end. What is to prevent me from being baptised?

I love this story of the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. It is one of my favourite passages in Scripture.

I love the way that the Holy Spirit appears not to have time at this crucial moment to work through the people of God in all the subtle ways it normally employs. The church needed to 'get a jog on' and so an angel told Philip to go to the Gaza road and then the Spirit had to tell Philip to go up to the man sitting in the chariot and at the end of the story the Spirit snatched Philip away and he 'found himself at Azotus', another place he wouldn't have thought of going on his own.

And the urgency of the Spirit is matched by the urgency of the court treasurer from Ethiopia who asks Philip 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?' The answer is of course, 'nothing.'

I love the inclusiveness of the story as well. One imagines that the Apostles were not expecting to baptise an African or a eunuch but that is where the Spirit takes Philip so decisively and so this is a story that makes it clear that the good news of the risen Christ is for the whole of humanity.

I love that the initiative is taken by the man who was baptised. It is he who has made the long journey to Jerusalem. It is he who is sitting by the side of the road reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit has to force Philip to the encounter but the Ethiopian man appears to have his own way there. And it is he who asks to be baptised. This story reminds us that people who are not like us are reaching out to God and the Holy Spirit of God is reaching out to them. This is the context of our own discipleship.

This story is a special gift to the church in Africa and to Christians of African descent. It places them at the beginning of the history of the church. It removes from them any necessity to apologise for having 'arrived late'. It helps to remove from the Gospels the burden of being brought to people via slavery or colonialism. The oldest Anglican church in Harlem is named after this St. Philip. The African Methodist Episcopalian Church, a major denomination within the American Church, has many churches named after this saint, whom the angel placed on the dusty Gaza road to baptise the first African Christian.

This story is also a special gift to transgendered people. We are not told the circumstances of the castration of the Ethiopian eunuch. But he was not as God created him. And yet there was nothing to prevent him from being baptised. Nothing separated him from God's love.

Among the many distressing aspects of life that this virus has brought is the troubling news that people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are 3 times as likely to die from the disease as the population as a whole. Scientists have not had time to discover a reason why white people might be genetically more able to resist the disease. So in the meantime, we are left to wonder whether this statistic results from health inequalities in society or the fact the black and minority ethnic people working in frontline services are more likely to be

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rota'd into dangerous tasks because of institutionalised racism. This is all unknown but is, in the present desperate circumstances, preying on many peoples' minds.

It is a good time, therefore, to be re-reading this story and taking its message about the inclusivity of God's love to heart.

For our finishing prayer, I consulted the website of St Philip's Church in Harlem, New York, which I attended in November last year.

Their website opens with the following mission statement:

To be a welcoming and vibrant inter-generational community of faith; focused on sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ through joyful worship and love, commitment to spiritual growth, and active service in the community.

The most recent message from their Rector finishes with this quote from Proverbs 3: 5-6;

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.*

It sounds like good advice.