

Chariots and Baptism (Bradford Cathedral 2-5-21)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord. My strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

The year is 1959, and my 10-year-old self, clad in a slightly-too-large, brand new senior school blazer in a hideous shade of dark mauve, is attending confirmation classes. The film 'Ben-Hur' has just been released and, like many people, I am overwhelmed by the chariot race sequence and its excitement.

Two weeks later, our class is working on this very lesson from Acts 8, where Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, and as a literal-minded child, I can vividly remember speculating how on earth he managed to read the prophet Isaiah in the back of a chariot. And this led to an ongoing personal interest in the story.

Of course, it wouldn't have been a racing chariot on the 'Ben-Hur' model, but something more akin to a covered wagon. The King James version of this story uses the word 'chariot' but some contemporary, and less elegant, translations have translated the Greek as 'cart' but it would certainly have accommodated at least two men, plus a driver, on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. And Gaza, at that time, a major port and also a home to a substantial Jewish community. It was also a stop on the on the very well-travelled road, thousand-year old, which was the frankincense trade route originating in east Africa and led northwards from the kingdom of Meroe in northern Sudan (the 'Ethiopia' of our story) along the Nile Valley and up to the Mediterranean coast. But whichever way our Ethiopian eunuch travelled, on his journey from home towards Jerusalem, overland or by sea, eventually to Gaza, it would have taken him at least 3 months each way.

These readings, from the Acts of the Apostles which we have as our first readings during the Easter season are a constant delight to me. They are fresh, they are highly coloured, they're personal. They give us something of the flavour of these very earliest days after the resurrection. And this one is no exception. Right at the start of the book of Acts, we hear Jesus promising the apostles: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to **the uttermost parts of the earth**". And it's this phrase, 'to the uttermost parts of the earth', that's significant for our story today. Because, of course, people in that time and thought of Ethiopia as "the uttermost parts of the earth," and they also thought of people like a

Ethiopian eunuch, however wealthy and well connected, as socially unacceptable from the standpoint of nationality, race, and blemish.

During this really early period, we see the development of the church in concentric circles: initially the conversion of people in Jerusalem (the city)— then outwards to Judea (the province in which Jerusalem is located)—then further out to Samaria (the adjoining province, and one not well thought of by Judeans) — and then out even further to “the uttermost parts of the earth’, spoken of at the time much like we might write on a map here be dragons’.

And the apostles, realised very clearly, that this fledgling church, this fledgling Christmas movement, wasn’t going to grow by chance. That it would take serious evangelism, serious hard work, the sacrifice of leaving homes and families for the sake of Christ and, in some cases, the need to sacrifice their own lives.

And this early development is all chronicled in the Acts of the Apostles and the story we’re considering today of the transformative encounter between Philip, one of the seven deacons, and the exotic occupant of a wagon on the Gaza road, is the last thing - ‘to the uttermost parts of the earth’.

So who was this person, and what was he doing there? We know, from the bible account, that he was a wealthy court official; he was on his way home. Many Jews had been exiled to Ethiopia after the Babylonian conquest in the 6th century BC. It is not at all improbable that this important man may have been a Jew, and we are told that he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

This would not have gone entirely smoothly. Luke stresses that he was a eunuch, which would have restricted his access to the portion of the Temple reserved for Jewish men, even if he had been born a Jewish man.

So, we have a wealthy, politically powerful, scripture-reading, deep thinking, God-worshipping eunuch who is about to have his life changed, again, forever. And Luke, the master story teller who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, frames his story around four questions and a quotation to be read as an invitation to dialogue between the two people. And this was the

tradition of what was called *havrutah*, a dialogue between two people, intended to tease out meanings.

The section of Isaiah that the eunuch is reading is part of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’, and these were prophecies appropriated by early Christian communities and taken to refer to Jesus—his death on the cross—his humiliation—his silence before his judges and his tormentors. *“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter. As a lamb before his shearer is silent, so he doesn’t open his mouth. In his humiliation, his judgment was taken away. Who will declare His generation? For his life is taken from the earth.”*

This is from Isaiah 53, and it highlights Luke’s overall claim that Jesus’ crucifixion was an injustice, and it was a fulfillment of the prophecy. And the eunuch, for who will have heard stories of Jesus during his time in Jerusalem, is in need of help and guidance about who these words apply to. And of course, we don’t know how long and detailed their discussion was, although clearly Philip is proclaiming the good news about Jesus to him in such a way that the eunuch makes an on-the-spot decision to become a follower.

Luke doesn’t tell us what Philip said to the eunuch, but we can infer, from the eunuch’s response, that Philip told him about Christian baptism—its significance and the eunuch’s need for baptism as an initiation into the community of believers.

The crucial question that he asks is the fourth one: “What is to prevent **me** from being baptised?”

For the eunuch has just been prevented from participation in the sacred rituals of the Temple, as a result of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23:1 where it says eunuchs may not ‘be admitted to the assembly of the Lord’. And undoubtedly his conversion is multifaceted, but the question remains an interesting one for us today. We can rephrase it slightly: ‘what is to prevent **anyone** from being baptised?’

And the answer should be a very simple one: nothing. Race, colour, gender, sexual orientation - there is absolutely nothing to prevent any human being from becoming a follower of Jesus, since all are equally loved and equally valued by God.

Or as St Paul says elegantly in Romans: 'For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The story should make us reflect about where **we** find guidance; books, friends, church, pastors?, and also whether we are open to new ideas and willing to act upon them. If we believe that they are indeed directed by the Holy Spirit.

It should also make us think about how open and welcoming we are to the stranger, the person who is different, the person who doesn't practice their faith in the same way that we do.

And it works both ways. How willing are we to share essential truths about the Christian faith with others? Would we help a total stranger to find Christ? How would we facilitate a life changing encounter, and would we be open to both giving and receiving it?

In these politically correct (woke) days, when we are all trying to be more caring about the sensibilities of others, this story of the conversion of this most exotic figure of an Ethiopian eunuch is deeply relevant. And at the end of the encounter, when following his baptism, the unnamed eunuch goes on his way rejoicing and presumably starts to evangelise the people of his own country with the good news about Jesus. Unfortunately the New Testament doesn't tell us anything more about this him, although there are several Christian historians - Irenaeus and Eusebius of the 2nd and 3rd centuries - who report that he becomes a missionary in Ethiopia—and it certainly makes sense that he would provide an active witness there.

The lessons for us in this remarkable story are many, and the reading teaches us three great truths about our Christian lives. Firstly, we should expect the unexpected; we never know what surprises the road God is leading us down we will encounter. We should remain open to new experiences.

Secondly, we should seek knowledge, and help, wherever it may be found, and not be too proud to profit from the advice and wisdom of others.

ALL lives matter: no one is separated from the love of God.

And thirdly, we must remember the responsibilities that we assumed on **our** baptism. We are required to share our experience of the good news with others as we, like the eunuch of the story, go on our way rejoicing. Perhaps not in quite such an exotic vehicle. Amen.