

## **Reflection for the 5th Sunday of Easter** by Megan Cambridge (Lay Reader)

During the Easter season we are following the history of the early church through the readings from the book of Acts. We are also reading our way through the first of John's epistles which seeks to address the problem of damage caused to the early church by some travelling teachers. John's approach is pastoral, demonstrating great affection for those to whom he writes. Too old to travel and 'put the record straight,' he writes his letters. Both readings, both authors, are inspired by a response to God's love.

In the Gospel reading, by talking about what happens when we are cut off from God, Jesus reveals the secret of Philip's success – his connectedness to Jesus. It is through this connection that he is able to bear the fruit and explain to the Ethiopian the good news. It is that reading from Acts and the three questions posed within it that I want to look at more closely.

'Acts' is a remarkable account of the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke sifts the evidence and selects the events which chart this expansion, providing a model for church life and a missionary manual to enable the expansion to continue. He shows us how God, the Holy Spirit, is at work building His kingdom, so we can be clear, whoever we are and wherever we live, about the ideals for which we should work and pray. Today's particular account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is part of that larger story of the universal embrace of the gospel. As Acts records it, the church's preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, starting from the Pentecostal epicentre in Jerusalem, is to spread to 'all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth'. (1:8) The goal is the restoration of all people under God's reign. As the gospel moves and spreads into the world it pulls to God and gathers into His mercy more and more of those who have been lost and pushed away and forgotten. The story recounted in our first reading is the very personal story of the recovery of just one of these outcast people by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Philip. It is a model of connectedness and obedience to God as Philip acts in response to the call and runs up to the chariot. In his turn, the Ethiopian's receptivity to the gospel models an attitude that is appropriate for all people.

The story opens with an important official of the Ethiopian palace in his chariot returning from pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As a eunuch he would have been prevented from converting but as a gentile could worship in the outer court of the temple enclosure. His journey to Jerusalem and his reading of the bible indicate he has an interest in the religion of Israel. He is travelling and reading aloud.

***'How can I understand unless someone guides me?'*** (V31). Instead of the usual poor and insignificant person seen as loved and valued by God here we have someone of position in a royal court, quite the opposite. However, despite position and wealth this is someone, according to the law of Deuteronomy, 'excluded from the assembly of the Lord' because of his sexual mutilation. However, he is not reading Deuteronomy but Isaiah, who offers more hope that the remnant of God's people in Ethiopia will be rescued and that 'eunuchs who keep the sabbaths' will be welcome in the house of God (Isaiah 56:1-8). This contradiction must have been confusing to this man; is it Deuteronomy or Isaiah that is correct? No wonder he says how can he understand it unless someone guides him? He needs someone who knows the scripture BUT also someone who knows the God of scripture, someone who has felt the embrace of God, 'who can read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God's spirit'. (Thomas Long). He needs Philip to guide him.

***'About whom .....does the prophet say this?'*** (v34) At the point at which Philip encounters him he has been reading about Isaiah's description of someone who 'like a sheep ....was led to the slaughter' and to whose humiliation 'justice was denied'. The eunuch is keen to know if this relates only to the person being written about or does it mean him too? Is this word of God only for that person being written about or is it for him? Is this word of God for and about someone else or is it for me, for us today? Here is someone who would have known about humiliation and justice denied and was wondering if God was speaking to him and to his own experience of being an outcast. Fortunately, the biblical word is never just about back then it is always a word to us, in the now, to our circumstances. Philip showed the eunuch how the passage from Isaiah was 'fulfilled in his hearing' and that was even better news than he could have imagined. Not only does God know and understand his experience of being humiliated and ostracised religiously but Jesus himself took on that lowly and outcast state. Philip explains that what Isaiah writes is not only reflecting him but also Jesus who was humiliated and denied justice. When the eunuch's story is refracted through the story of the cross and resurrection it becomes a story of redemption, restoration and hope and ultimately also a fulfilment of Isaiah 56:5-6.

***'What is to prevent me from being baptised?'*** (v37) At that time there would have been quite a few obstacles put in the way to prevent him being baptised. He was living in Ethiopia cut off from Israel. He was a eunuch so in violation of the purity code. He was a member of the cabinet of the queen of Ethiopia, therefore loyal to the wrong sovereign. In short, he belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job and possessed the wrong sexuality. Philip, however, heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the question. 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?' asked the eunuch 'Absolutely nothing' whispered the Holy Spirit. He commanded the chariot to stop and was baptised right there on the spot.

In this story from the books of Acts we see walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations come tumbling down and a man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored through the wideness of God's grace in Jesus Christ. We see what happens when we listen to the Spirit and surrender our own travel plans for a while.

Today's story is one of radical inclusion which characterised the early church community and reflects Jesus' message for all peoples. What offers great hope is that the church has expanded not always in great leaps forward, vast swathes of conversions but also one soul at a time, something we can all take a part in by sharing the Good News of God revealed in Jesus without partiality or prejudice.