



Resurrection Journeys

Session 6: Creative, courageous; open to the unexpected and surprising

Phillip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8

I would like to share with you some of my reflections on the passage from Acts Chapter 8 verses 26-40: Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch. And then go on to consider another journey Luke writes about, the Emmaus Road, which we read his Gospel writings, Luke Chapter 24:13-35.

Let's begin with looking at the characters in the Acts story and start with the Ethiopian Eunuch. What do we know about him? The Bible passage doesn't say very much by way of a description. Verse 27 says: "there was an Ethiopian eunuch a court official of the Kandake, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury".

The term "Ethiopian" may also be translated as "African" so we cannot be sure exactly where he was from, but he came from the African continent. His skin would have been darker than others in Jerusalem and he would have been considered a foreigner. Also, he was a eunuch. It was common for court officials who were in charge of harems or who worked closely with the queen, to be made a eunuch so that the females would be safe from any inappropriate advances. But being a eunuch would have changed his physical appearance, his build, and his voice. All in all, he would have been considered strange in looks as well as being a stranger in terms of being a visitor. It is at this point worth remembering something from the story of

Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2. Jerusalem was a place filled with people of different nationalities. Verse 5: “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.” There would have been other African people in Jerusalem, but I still think an African eunuch would have stood out.

We are told the eunuch “*had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home*”. If he had been worshipping in Jerusalem, was he Jewish? Judaism was not common in Africa so he may have been a “seeker”, someone with an active interest in the things of God who wanted to know more about the Scriptures and what it means to connect with God; or he may have been a “proselyte”, a Gentile who had converted to the Jewish faith. But either way we are told he had come to Jerusalem to worship, he was on his way home and was holding one of the scrolls of scripture, the scroll of Isaiah, and from this we might reasonably deduce that he was well educated as he was able to read this Hebrew scroll.

We are not told whether he was travelling alone or with others just that he was on a wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Travelling around was dangerous. There was a distinct lack of signposting, so it was easy to get lost, the roads were rough which made navigating them difficult, and you were under constant threat of attacks from bandits. It is almost inconceivable that a person of this importance, in charge of the Kandake’s treasury, would not be travelling with an entourage to protect him and to serve him. He was important. All we do know from the text is that he was in a chariot. Our mind might initially imagine a Roman racing chariot, which was usually manned by just one-person, gladiatorial style. But in verse 38 we read: “*He commanded the chariot to stop*”, there must have at least been someone else driving the chariot, but I think it’s highly likely that there was quite a procession of people with him.

So, to recap, one of the main characters in our story today was an outsider, and not only a foreigner by nationality but someone who looked different. He was someone who was seeking to know more about the Jewish faith, he was wealthy, able to afford to travel with a servant or servants, willing to take the risk of travelling along the wilderness road, he was educated, able to read a passage of Hebrew scripture but he was struggling to understand it. He was perhaps on a wilderness road in more ways than one.

Let us now turn to the other principal character of this story, Philip.

Each of the gospels mentions Philip as one of the 12 followers of Christ. John’s Gospel identifies him as being from Bethsaida, the same city as

Andrew and Simon Peter and it is Philip who calls Nathaniel to join Jesus having been invited to “come and see” by Jesus himself. In John’s account of the feeding of the 5000 it is Philip whom Jesus challenges to find food for the crowd. Philip had been one of the central apostles in the Gospels.

Just before this passage, earlier in Acts 8, we have heard that Philip was preaching in Samaria giving the Good News and many were baptised as a result of his preaching.

Verse 12: *“But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”*

Philip was already doing a great job of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and bringing people to baptism. He wasn’t slacking. But in this passage the angel of the Lord sends Philip away and places him in the vicinity of the Ethiopian traveller. The same angel then tells him to go over and join the chariot.

I wonder how Philip felt being taken from doing the job he thought he was being called to do in the place he thought he was being called to do it, to finding himself alone on a wilderness road, approaching this stranger. His previous evangelising had been in public places, talking to many people, but local people, baptising great numbers. What a contrast to this situation. But he obeys the angel’s command and approaches the chariot whereupon he hears the Ethiopian reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. His response is to ask the man, *“Do you understand what you are reading?”*

“How can I, unless someone guides me?” the man replies. Philip takes this opportunity to join the stranger in the chariot and explains the good news about Jesus.

³⁵ *“Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.”*

Philip uses Old Testament scripture to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

I mentioned earlier the other wilderness road journey that Luke writes about, the Emmaus Road encounter. In this passage two friends are travelling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, discussing the events of Jesus’ resurrection, as Jesus, not recognised by the friends, joins them. The road in this passage is not referred to as a wilderness road and indeed there are remnants of Roman stones along it suggesting a well-used pathway. But the two men themselves are in a state of confusion and bewilderment.

They are on their own wilderness road. What has happened? What does it mean? Like the Eunuch in the first story, they too are trying to make sense of something.

Jesus then appears to them and upon hearing their confusion:

“²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

Jesus uses Old Testament scripture to proclaim the good news of his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. Again, when we are confused, we turn to scripture for the answer.

In both stories, an encounter on a wilderness road between people who were in a state of confusion and possible despair and a disciple of Christ or Christ himself, have their faith renewed through scripture; they travel from a place of despair to a place of hope, of fresh insight, of rebirth.

In the first story, this is expressed by the eunuch seeing a stretch of water and asking Philip to baptise him. An immediate response to hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. A literal being led to rebirth through baptism. In the second story the two disciples on realising they are in the presence of Jesus when he breaks bread with them, respond by running back to tell their friends what has happened. When the good news is revealed, there is a response.

I wonder if you have ever been on a wilderness road, metaphorically. If you have felt lost or confused. Where have you turned? Who has come alongside you? How did you respond?

Our travelling well together values encourage us to be *open to the unexpected and surprising*. We encounter a variety of people who God will use to talk to us, or God will want us to engage with. Think of Philip meeting this stranger in the chariot.

We are called to be *creative* in our ways of telling the good news, using the gifts God has given us to unpack the story in different, but authentic and honest, ways. We are called to meet people where they are. Philip was taken away from what he was doing, and what he was doing well, to meet with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip was unlikely to have been comfortable in approaching the chariot. He would have had to draw on his own reserves of courage as he approached this wealthy and important foreigner.

I asked earlier if you have ever felt like you were on a wilderness road. One positive thing about being in such a place, is that we have to become

reliant on others and on God to help us, and this in turn opens us up to hearing what they are saying and to responding. When we are doing fine, have everything in hand, we don't always listen so well to God. We don't need Him in the same way that we do when we are vulnerable, confused and alone. Our prayers change from ones of thankfulness to ones where we ask for help and open ourselves up to what God is trying to say. And perhaps these experiences lead us to thin places, where we are able to encounter God more readily, where the Holy Spirit can break in. Where we can be creative and courageous with what God is saying to us, what God is calling us to, and make us open to the unexpected and surprising.

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