

Curious Faith

Easter V 2024

Acts 8:26-end

How rich and exciting is this? Today's key figure, Philip, follows the way of Jesus, has a Greek name and yet is steeped in the Hebrew scriptures. He responds impulsively to the spiritual curiosity of an Ethiopian. Dr Harvey Kwiyani, Chief Executive Officer, Global Connections¹, describes how Christianity has been an inter-cultural faith from the outset. Migration has always been a part of its character. Jesus was from "Galilee of the Gentiles". He says the Term Christian was coined in the time of Acts to pick out an emerging faith community that was fundamentally multi cultural and multi ethnic in character.

But the diversity does not end there. Surely one of the most fascinating characters we tantalisingly meet in the New Testament, one of those with whom I'd most like to have a beer, (Philip would be fascinating, too, but an unreliable drinking partner as he could be whisked away by the Holy Spirit any moment) it is this Ethiopian man: a top civil servant in an East African culture. Luke evokes a lot with a few details where we can glimpse his character: someone in high office has travelled to Jerusalem out of Spiritual curiosity. So curious is he that he has purchased an astonishingly expensive copy of Isaiah, something very rarely in private ownership. He is a eunuch, so has been mutilated for the safety and reputation of a Queen. That made him disabled in such a way as to forbid him entry to the Jerusalem Temple but such rejection has not dampened his curiosity. He is a man of influence and impotence; power and need. He is eager for help interpreting these scriptures where he is mesmerised by talk of humiliation and sacrifice somehow pointing to something good to come. He shows no sign of security concerns inviting the man walking alongside up into his carriage. For all his horribly grown up job – sort of chancellor of the exchequer – he is impulsive, eager, and prone to gratitude. After baptism, even when his spiritual guide is suddenly gone, with the same eagerness as the shepherds in Luke, he goes on his way "rejoicing." Like those shepherds, he returns to his old life with new vigour and perspective. The Christian Church in Ethiopia lives today. Who knows what part he played in making that a reality?

The text firmly faces us with the Ethiopian's exotic quality: the Gaza area then was a desert – a culturally disorientating place - bordering Egypt, a culture characterised by mysterious ancient gods, wealth, power, dictatorship, past myths of both hospitality and slavery. But the Ethiopian will pass through that unsettling land on to his own: his exquisite dark skin and elegant facial bone structure adding layer upon layer of otherness, mystery, and either richness or threat depending on the demeanour of Luke's first readers.

So he is a gift. A gift to Ethiopia. A gift to Philip and the church of the time. A gift to us, inspiring prayer for all in leadership, especially those who make huge sacrifices in order to take responsibility, who sacrifice family life for some bigger purpose; all who turn what others see as disability into a gift that makes new things possible; all who, despite rejection and prejudice, stay eager, curious and prone to gratitude.

It's worth noting how eunuchs appear in the book of Isaiah, which he read in his carriage. The eunuch is a focus of lament in Isaiah 39:7 when, being led into exile he warns Israel their sons will be made eunuchs in Babylon. Apart from losing freedom, they will lose sexual potency. It is a macabre example of sex used as a psychological weapon of war. How devastating that rhetoric

¹ Global Connections (GC) is a vibrant community of mostly UK-based charities, churches, colleges, individuals, and support services, working and learning together as we explore the future of mission, and endeavour to equip and inspire Christians for cross-cultural mission. <https://globalconnections.org.uk/>

was meant to be. Later, Isaiah 56:4 talks of the restoration of Israel and that eunuchs who have kept the faith should not hold themselves in contempt. They will be given an honoured place in God's house and given an "everlasting name" – in other words, even their lack of offspring will be compensated for in God's memory. That Isaiah uses Eunuchs of all people to illustrate Israel's restoration is rhetorically a sign that they were the least expected beneficiaries of God's affection.

When we read Acts today, with all the church's dysfunction and angst around gender and sex, it is a wonder that we think this a modern preoccupation. Luke may not have used strings of initials like LGBTQ+, but this amazing, gifted figure in Acts is such a rich and category-shattering example of a human being that he opens up all such possible spectrums of gender, culture, status, and breaks down boundaries between categories. We meet him in chapter 8, before we even have the row about whether a straight Roman Centurion presumably with balls intact, can be accepted in the fellowship. The layers of foreignness about this Ethiopian are deliberately shown and enjoyed and worked by Luke the craftsman-writer.

It's interesting to see where the Ethiopian begins. He is fascinated by the humiliation and shame of a strange figure in Isaiah, as though somehow shame and powerlessness are mysteriously a part of the journey to humanity being rescued. Influential and wealthy as he is, perhaps his own shame and powerlessness is part of why he is drawn to that text. How can he, barred from the holy places, be made to feel he belongs with God? His hunch is that it will be found in the pathos of that forlorn Christ figure.

Philip explains the whole story. Philip knows Jesus has gone to the place of our deepest shame and rose again to disarm and dismantle the shame-fear-deficit confidence trick we all conspire in. Jesus had to go there to break its spell. He had to go there to prove that he is unshakeably with anyone shamed or belittled and will raise them to new dignity. The Eunuch finds dignity and joy in Baptism. As the Christian texts emerge, these encounters shaped a theology that recognised goodness and gift in strangers. There is two-fold significance in the language of John about God being love, and those who live in love living in God. Not only does it ask whether people in the church fellowship are manifesting love, proving they abide in God. It also means if someone outside the baptised fellowship bears fruit (John 15), lives in love (1 John 4) then you can assume God abides in them. They are part of the vine.

Last night **Inclusion +²** gave us a new vision for society. They radically overturned the deficit approach to adults with additional social and learning needs. Once it had been going for a few years, All Saints Youth Project hit a problem. Young people grow up. Funding for youth work can't be used for people once they pass their early twenties. But the young people who found security and belonging and dignity in that safe space couldn't just be ejected and left to fend for themselves suddenly. What about navigating the adult world with needs and vulnerabilities, sometimes visible, that others always see as deficit?

Inclusion + was created, seeking specific funding, harder to find, providing support and companionship and nurturing life skills for those young adults, who continued to get older, as people do. Friday night and yesterday afternoon, they filled this space with Joy, which is, you will recall, one of the top seven specific, capital letter gifts of the Holy Spirit herself.

Heaven forbid anyone belittle or ignore the agony of parents, the loneliness of the journey sometimes, the stomach lurch of diagnosis. Heaven forbid more sternly still the ghastly insult of euphemism when we consider child, then youth, then adult social and learning needs. A word like disability may have a place, especially as people, families, parents, get to know their child, their

² Part of our Youth Project, continuing to care for those now growing into adulthood beyond the scope of Youth funding, but still needing support and a safe place as they find their way in the adult world.

young person growing into and adult. Diagnosis can unlock doors, accessing support. But if the "dis" language becomes the default setting all sorts of assumptions flow out of it even in the most well meaning of us. Additional needs isn't a bad phrase, because it firmly insists we all have needs.

Inclusion + is not about promising the impossible or adopting euphemisms, or cruelly encouraging people to over reach. It is about beginning relationship with the assumption of gift, not deficit. Two hundred souls felt the Spirit's gift this weekend, released, bestowed, ignited by Inclusion +'s production "This is me."

The deficit approach to the palpable needs of the friends who bestowed that joy would pat them on the head and go home, glad we've done something worthy for them; to them. The gift approach throws the head back and laughs, whoops with delight, wipes a tear away during a dance and lets the warm shower of joy restore us and realise what a parched thirst it is satisfying. A gift approach perceives that this group, who meet critical or embarrassed stares when they go on an outing to the pub, have real authority when it comes to the Holy Spirit's gift of Joy. On a visit from our neighbours Uffculme School, a bright young man, endlessly curious, among his many questions asked "will Jesus cure autism?" The answer was "No. He will heal society's inability to enjoy autistic people and recognise their gifts." During an assembly at Uffculme, a beautiful young girl wearing a headscarf shouted at me "this is fucking rubbish." Staff stiffened visibly, touchingly protective of me, but I thanked her for her honesty. Reflecting afterwards, I wondered how often truth she has spoken has not been heard because we can take refuge in superior indignation about a swear word and not face what she has pointed out. When we find honesty embarrassing, who has the deficit?

Who might have turned heads and attracted a sneer or a wince in Philip's day? Clearly one example is a wealthy black man, whose little silver pipe sticking out of his turban with which he would urinate would give away just who he was. Foreign, wealthy, yet impotent. What a gift if you *want* to feel the addictive surge of prejudice. But imagine what East Africa would have missed if Philip had not drawn alongside the Ethiopian? Imagine what the church would have missed if the knee jerk exclusivism, carefully recorded by Luke in Acts, being overcome wave after wave, had won the argument and only Jewish people of a certain ethnic background could be baptised?

In our society, who turns heads, towards them with stares and mockery, or away with embarrassment? Such people as held our grateful gaze yesterday, perhaps. How right that Inclusion + performed in here; that the joy and honesty was felt in here; that the sense of need was pushed to the edges and the gift set centre stage and a group of marginalised adults became our teachers of Joy, begging the playful Gospel questions:

What are we missing?

What fruit are we not enjoying?

and

Who has the deficit?