

Acts 8:26-end. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

SERMON

There's a word for the story from Acts today – the story of Philip being asked to go down a wilderness road and engage an Ethiopian eunuch in conversation. And that word is 'random'. It can sometimes feel as though a number of things in life are random, but on the other hand, I wonder if it is appropriate to speak of anything as being random in the grand plans of God?

I'd like to start by giving us a chance to think about the idea of randomness. Please share with someone sitting near you whether you sometimes feel life is 'random' or are you confident it's all covered by a wonderful plan?

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So, let's return to Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip was one of the seven deacons appointed to serve by the early believers after the time of Jesus. They had already lost one of those seven, Stephen, to martyrdom and the church had recently been scattered due to persecution.

Philip was a gifted evangelist, and has been sharing the faith, along with other disciples, throughout Samaria. You will remember that Samaria was home to the Samaritans, a group of people generally avoided by Jews, but now joyful recipients of the new faith in Christ.

The explosion of joy and good news released at Pentecost is still reverberating. Previous barriers are coming down and old enemies are one in Christ. It's an exciting time of renewal and missionary expansion.

In the middle of all this, Philip is called by God to take a very different direction. 'Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road).'

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza is, today, metaphorically, a very long road. It's almost as if Jerusalem and Gaza are different universes with such opposed views that it's hard to see how the deadlock can be circumnavigated. The road from Jerusalem to Gaza' in terms of peace, is a very long and very tortuous one.

Here's what the road looks like geographically (see slide).

After all the excitement of the Samaritan conversions, here is a seemingly random instruction: go down on the wilderness road to Gaza. We know that wilderness is a bible motif that refers simultaneously to barrenness, testing and ultimately to fruitfulness.

Think about John the Baptist, 'a voice of one crying in the wilderness'; Jesus led to the wilderness by the Spirit; the Israelites wandering forty years in the desert. The

wilderness road is a hard one and not the obvious one if you're looking for instant spiritual success.

One translation suggests Philip is not only to go south, but to go at noon, in the heat of the day. We might think of the Samaritan woman who walked out in the heat of the day to avoid others, but bumped into Jesus.

The wilderness road. If you find yourself on the wilderness road at present, very likely it will feel lonely, hard work and never ending. It will no doubt feel like a dead end, a road that leads nowhere. But if you're open to what might happen on that road, you might be surprised.

We can be captivated in the church by status and numbers. No matter how hard we try and focus on the one small but significant act and the one small but significant relationship, we still, at the end of the day, have to record how many people were in church each Sunday. When it looks like some things we do are shrinking, it's tempting to find safety in numbers.

But Philip the evangelist is so attuned that he hears the voice of God directing him down a random road to nowhere, and he meets a random person who is even more 'outside' the normal Jewish parameters than a Samaritan.

He meets an African. The meeting with the Ethiopian is another outworking of the Great Commission: 'You shall be my witnesses in Samaria and to the ends of the earth' and the Pentecost principle, a quotation from the prophet Joel: 'I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.' The universality of God's love is there in Scripture – but we are often swayed by the identity of our tribe.

In those days, it was common in Eastern royal courts to have some men castrated in order to keep them subservient and faithful in the court. Thus they would be prevented from taking female partners and would not sire children that might threaten the monarch. As eunuchs they would feel safe to have around and would often rise to responsible positions.

This Ethiopian is a eunuch, and is Treasurer in the court of the Ethiopian Queen, in charge of the entire budget. We are told that he had come to Jerusalem to worship, so it's likely he was a Jewish convert.

Travelling along in his chariot, he is reading the prophet Isaiah out loud. Maybe he has been inspired by the gathering for worship in Jerusalem. Now, alone, and on his way back to his own country, he reads a passage about someone who's suffered. I wonder if he felt a personal connection:

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
And like a lamb silent before its shearer....
In his humiliation, justice was denied him...
Who can describe his generation?'

Later Christians would ascribe this passage retrospectively to Jesus, but I wonder if it strikes a chord with this man who's also been a victim of humiliation, and who, like Jesus, will never see his bloodline continue to the next generation.

He is wondering about whom the passage is written. It perhaps seems to him there is something deeper going on than simply Isaiah the prophet talking about his own troubles. Could it be the prophet is referring to someone beyond his own context?

At this crucial moment of wondering, very un-randomly, Philip catches up with the chariot.

I like the title of Nadia Bolz Weber's sermon on this story: 'The Conversion of Philip by a Gender Transgressive Foreigner'
https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/05/the-conversion-of-phillip-by-a-gender-transgressive-foreigner/#_ftn1

In it she suggests that Philip would be at least as much changed by this encounter as the Ethiopian. Philip is an observant Jew who follows Jesus. He knows his Scriptures; he knows the Law. He would be familiar with Deuteronomy 23:1, which reads 'no one who is emasculated by crushing or cutting shall enter into the congregation of the Lord'.

Or, if you prefer the King James translation: 'He that is wounded in the stones or that hath his privy member cut off...' And here is just such a person standing before Philip. But whatever awareness of the limitations of belonging for a eunuch within Jewish Law, Philip doesn't hesitate for a moment to go down into the water with him in a joyful act of Christian initiation.

We don't use the word eunuch today. But the conversation about transgendered people continues in society and in the Church. We need great wisdom to avoid getting caught up in the culture wars. Simple binaries like male and female are called into question in this encounter from Acts. We understand from Matthew 19 that Jesus' hearers would have been more familiar with the word *eunuch* than we are today.

In Matthew 19 Jesus's disciples, having learnt that Jesus frowns upon quickie divorces instigated by uncommitted husbands, draw the conclusion it's best not to marry (I think we can assume he's having this conversation with men). To which Jesus answers: 'not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given' (v. 11).

'' For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can''' (v. 12).

I take this to mean that singleness is a gift and a calling – it cannot be forced onto anyone. It would seem also that to God the sexual identity of the Ethiopian eunuch is immaterial. What matters to God is that he is loved and called.

And so this random meeting, which, of course, is not random at all, is the beginning of the expansion of Christianity into Africa – a continent that today has over 718 million Christians, expected to reach one billion by 2050.

We can end our reflections by observing that what appears random to us – a chance meeting, an unlooked-for conversation – can often have some very fruitful consequences. Let us keep our eyes, ears and hearts open to the promptings of the Spirit, therefore.

Amen.

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