

Downwards: Life from Death for the Deep South

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'²⁷So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'

³⁰Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked.

³¹'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³²This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

*'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

*Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.'*

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?'³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.

³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Sermon

It was good to welcome many of you to the south, to Jersey, back in July, when we celebrated St Helier Day, and it is a joy to have travelled to be with you today, to represent the South in your series on North and South, East and West.

I was reminded, though, in an out-of-the-blue email from a Belgian couple who recently visited the Town Church in St Helier, that of course St Helier travelled to Jersey from the East, from their home town of Tongeren.

Nevertheless, I want to reflect on good news for the South, hence our reading this evening from Acts 8.

In Acts 8 we find ourselves in between the gospel bearing fruit in Jerusalem and it bursting out from there to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And we see once again that God is at work. God is behind the expansion of the gospel. Jesus announced it before he ascended; the Holy Spirit enables it as he was poured out; and so God is behind it.

26Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' ²⁷*So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,* ²⁸*and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.* ²⁹*The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'*

³⁰*Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked.*

Who brought Philip down to the desert road heading south? God did.
Who spoke to Philip and told him to up to the Ethiopian's chariot? God did.

Who arranged this quite remarkable incident, that at the very moment that Philip should go up to the chariot, the Ethiopian Eunuch should be reading from Isaiah 53? God did.

And who is it that so worked in the heart of the Ethiopian that he wants to hear the very heart of the good news at the very moment that Philip comes alongside his chariot? God.

Hard to avoid concluding that God is at work as Philip, led by the Holy Spirit, finds himself at the right place in the right time at the right point in this man's life. This man, this Ethiopian Eunuch, is Queen Candace's Chancellor of the Exchequer. He's from what is likely now North Sudan, the Old Testament nation of Cush. It seems likely that he was a Jewish convert and had been in Jerusalem worshipping at a Jewish festival. A high-ranking African now heading back south, back to number 11, or wherever the Chancellor lived in those days.

We can imagine him travelling in his ministerial limousine and laid out on the expansive, expensive leather seats are his executive papers and his iPhone. He's likely spent most of his morning journey so far plotting how he can communicate that the state of the Ethiopian economy is solely down to the financial mismanagement of his predecessors and how Ethiopia leaving the African Union will definitely be only a good thing. "Exit", I guess.

But now he's put all of his thoughts on hold and his mind turns to something that has been troubling him since his visit to Jerusalem. Because when he was at the temple he had been to the temple bookstore and seen a special offer on the scroll of Isaiah and he'd bought it. Not, I presume, on expenses. But as a foreigner, tax-free. A popular hobby in Jersey is minimising tax.

As he was reading out loud—as was the custom—and had got to the bit just where God explains that people from the nations, even nations like Cush, would be brought into blessing by the suffering and death of his servant—at that very moment Philip approaches his chariot.

Is it not remarkable that the Ethiopian eunuch should not be reading from this place at this point as Philip approaches?

Impossible not to conclude that God is in control of what—as seen throughout Acts—is the unstoppable advance of his good news. The good thing is that whole thing doesn't depend upon me. God does it all. God is at work in hearts, in directing people, in changing lives.

Even today: whether relaxing on the beach in Jersey, or sitting here in Oxford, it is easy to forget that across the world today God's good news is advancing at an extraordinary pace: Thinking of the Ethiopian, think of Africa today; think of China; even of North Korea.

And just like the Ethiopian, it may just be that you are here by divine appointment: not quite sure how you got here or why you came here.

Certainly not by chariot. But something brought you. God's divine appointment for you?

Let's focus in on the two verses from Isaiah 53 which we find the Ethiopian reading.

³²This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

*'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

*Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.'*

So, the Ethiopian's reading in Isaiah reaches chapter 53; clearly a long journey and no other in-chariot entertainment! And this chapter is right at the heart of Isaiah's astonishing message.

The great commentator on Isaiah, Alec Motyer, says "the towering theological genius of Isaiah is nowhere more apparent than in this chapter."

As the Ethiopian went up to the temple in Jerusalem he couldn't have avoided the sacrifice of animals; the noise, the smell, the sights. But the sacrifice there was symbolically to do away with sin: an animal in my place to carry God's judgement on sin such that I can have access to God without fear and judgement.

But of course no animal could never satisfactorily carry that weight in the end. Ultimately just a picture. The animal goes to its death in blind compliance, but the prophet Isaiah speaks of a day when the servant of God would come as God and would go willingly to his death as a sacrificial lamb in order to carry God's just judgement.

*'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

This servant, fully human, would do what no human had ever done before: live perfectly the will of God; accept perfectly the will of God; to go to the place of sacrifice. The wonder of these verses. The heart of Isaiah 53. And the Ethiopian gets there.

Not surprisingly he asks his question:

'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?'

And Philip is ready with his answer:

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Who lived perfectly and accepted the will of God humbly? Jesus. Who died as a perfect, sinless, and obedient substitute for the sins of humanity? Jesus. Who is this divine being who can achieve what thousands of sheep over centuries has failed to achieve? Jesus.

Jesus Christ has done everything that the temple pointed to. For the Gentiles, the nations, as well as for God's people Israel.

*³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.'*

Who can speak of his descendants? Who can number his descendants? Acts 8 here seems to summarise the last part of Isaiah's great prophecy which speaks of the outcome of the death of God's servant. God would raise up his servant to life and make him the head of a vast number of people. From the nations. From all over the globe. Drawn together by God. From East and South and North and West—as we heard in Psalm 107 earlier. They are like the sand on the sea shore, like the dust of the earth, like the stars in the sky. Innumerable.

And this fits perfectly with our Ethiopian friend: he had gone up to Jerusalem for a festival: as a Eunuch he was not allowed into the temple; he was considered impure. As a foreigner he was not allowed into the inner courts. He was living under the cloud and the curse of death.

And so his visit to the temple was both inspiration but also profound anticlimax. He has travelled all that way. The trip of a lifetime. But discovers as he arrives that the outer court of the Gentiles has a great wall around it, chest-high, and posted on the wall in Latin and in Greek: "no man of another race is to enter into the fence and enclosure" - a huge keep out sign!

Therefore every visit for this man was a reminder that he was not nor ever could be a full member of God's people. He had no way of becoming a true insider.

And surely that's why he asks his question in v34: who is the prophet talking about? Tell me. Who is it that is going to die on my behalf? Who will take my sin upon themselves, my sin which excludes and is so profound. Who will enable me to have full access, to be included?

As we sang earlier:

*How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss -
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.*

All of which then makes sense then of v36:

"Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?"

Exactly: nothing now stands in the way of his being baptised, being included, being brought in. All accomplished by the suffering servant, the one man Jesus Christ.

And all makes sense of what's going on in this passage from the beginning: Philip travelling South from Jerusalem, away from the temple.

People from every race, rank, religion and none, coming to bow the knee before the Lord Jesus. And at the heart of the message they're hearing is that Jesus Christ died on the cross for sin, has been exalted to heaven by God, and that by putting our trust fully in him; whatever our past, whoever we are, we are accepted and fully included amongst the people of God.

Life from death for the deep South. For Ethiopia, for Jersey, for Oxford, for the world.