

Acts 8.26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian

- In discussing how we would bring the theme of being disciples to Simple Worship, one idea suggested was that we could turn to the New Testament to consider the experience of a few individual disciples.
 - I opted for Philip, since it gave me the opportunity to speak on this passage, which I feel has so much to offer.
- But let's start by looking at what we know about Philip.
- Well first let's make it clear that this is unlikely to be Philip from Bethsaida,
 - one of the 12 original apostles who accompanied Jesus during his public ministry,
 - the one who introduced Nathanael to Jesus and who crops up frequently in gospel of John
- Instead here we are talking about another person entirely. Philip the deacon and evangelist.
- from Acts 21 we learn, that his hometown was Caesarea, the admin centre of Roman province of Judea,, about 30 miles west of Nazareth.
- Deacon, because the post pentecost church was growing rapidly and the original apostles were finding themselves buried under a weight of admin, charity work and other practical aspects of life as a caring community.
- In particular Acts 6 reveals that certain Greek speaking elements of the church were feeling that their needs were being overlooked.
- So apostles prayed and laid hands on 7 men chosen by the church for this role, who would pick up mundane but important work.
 - Stephen the 1st martyr was one of these deacons, Philip was another.
- The name Philip is of Greek origin, meaning lover of the horse
 - so seems reasonable to assume that he may have been one of the Hellenists, the Greek speakers in the community
- Not long after, church faced heavy persecution by the Jewish authorities, via Paul et al.
 - Consequently they end up scattered with just a small core of 12 apostles plus presumably few others remaining in Jerusalem-
- Philip ends up in Samaria- the ancient city and surrounding mountainous, central region of ancient Palestine.
 - Where the locals practiced an Abrahamic religion closely related to Judaism.
 - In fact Samaritans saw their worship as the true religion of the ancient Israelites, preserved by those who had not been deported during the Babylonian exile.
 - As such they were looked down on by their orthodox Jewish neighbours.
- But when Philip arrives, what does he do? –
 - well start preaching the good news of course.
- Here is a guy with a fairly straightforward approach to life-
 - when Jesus met a Samaritan woman, he offered her living water, well I'm in Samaria so I'll offer them baptism.
 - And just make sure all know this kosher, I'll get Peter and John to come across and lay hands on them also.
- Here we see why the church refers to him not only as deacon, but also evangelist.
- This is the Philip who in v 26 receives an angelic vision urging him to go south to the desert road connecting Jerusalem and Gaza

- Lets turn to the other character in today's passage, the Ethiopian.
- Described as eunuch- common in ancient world
 - No family, no loyalty except to their king or master
- Safe pair of hands in sensitive positions like managing the harem, taster of king's food
 - 2 Kgs 20-18 and Is 39.7 Isaiah prophesies that some of Hezekiah's family will be taken away as eunuchs to places of Babylon.
 - Esther 1.10- list of 7 eunuchs attending King
 - 2.3-15 we find eunuch courtiers conveying virgins candidates to the king and protecting them and advising them
- This one was Queen's chancellor, in charge of her treasury
- Told he had come to worship,
- Was this act of political solidarity?
 - Quite possible since there were links between Ethiopia and Israel back to time of Solomon
- Or was this personal faith quest- seeking something, someone?
 - We don't know
- What we can assume is that worship experience would have been disappointing and frustrating
- The temple as we know was amazingly segregated-
- Consider how Paul gets arrested and sparks a wholesale city riot in Act 21 because it is rumoured that he defiled temple by bringing a Greek with him.
 - But this fellow isn't just some olive skinned individual who at a pinch could be overlooked in the crowds, but an Ethiopian- a black man.
- But you say, he could at least have come to court of Gentiles. –
- Well don't be so sure, there are other obstacles to be overcome, such as
 - *Lev 21.16ff "No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running eye sores or damaged testicles"*
 - *Deut 23.1 "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord"*
- This man triple rejected by worshipping community in Jerusalem- excluded on racial and physical/ sexual grounds.
- As this eunuch enters our story his chariot is on the Jerusalem to Gaza road travelling on long journey home- probably feeling totally humiliated and frustrated
 - 3000 miles round trip from Yeha or Aksum, century Ethiopian capitals to Jerusalem & back - what a waste of time
- Now if I were made unwelcome, excluded by a religious group I just know how I would react
 -
 - "that's it, I've had enough of those holy Joes- they know where they can put their God and their scriptures."
 - Do you recognise the feeling- or is it just me?
- But this Ethiopian is different- he has seen something and he wants to know more.
 - Its like there is a spark an attraction that will not let go.
- And even after all that has happened, he seems to still searching-

- For as he passes on the road, Philip can hear him reading aloud from scripture.
- We can guess that it is from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew bible,
 - Why? because Philip the Greek speaker is able to recognise the passage- it is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 53.7-8
- Just picture the scene
 - dusty desert road,
 - Philip wondering why on earth he has been told to be in this forsaken place
- when along comes this rather splendid chariot and its escort, in which a black foreigner is reading a familiar passage in a high pitched voice and strange accent. and the encounter.
- There are comic elements, which seem to continue
 - Not a man slow in coming forward, Philip shouts out “Hey, do you understand what you are reading”
- The foreign person looks up, surprised to be interrupted by a stranger who is walking along in the middle of nowhere.
 - “Well how can I be expected to, unless somebody guides me”. He replies testily.
 - “Come on then Mr Know-it-all if you reckon you understand what this is about,
 - why don't you climb aboard and explain it to me?”
- This as we see leads to Philip up in chariot in discussion
- Why is eunuch so engaged with this passage, what echoes speak to his experience?
 - Image of cutting, lamb- silent as life opportunities removed
 - His chances of producing any generation taken from him
 - This crushing humiliation, evident for all to see in the plump and soft testosterone deprived body, the voice so girlish
 - Once he was a playful little boy, but just look at his circumstances now: neither a man, nor a woman- just an it
- Where's the justice for him? Not fair, why don't I have choices as others do?
- As we reflect deeper on his situation and feelings
 - and feelings, the comic turns to pathos, our smiles to sympathy
- We cannot help but feel for this individual who has been so abused by his own society
 - And now whose search to draw near to his God has just been thrown back in his face by those in Jerusalem
- But as they ride along, a question forms in the Ethiopian's mind.
 - Who is this passage I have been reading about. Is Isaiah speaking of his own experience or about someone else?
- What a perfect opener for Philip, who is able to talk of another man with no progeny
 - a man also damaged by others- who was humiliated and rejected, by the people of Israel. led to slaughter, killed in his prime.
 - Yet this is man who God calls his own son, who is the way God is making all things new
- For Philip is speaking of Jesus, the fulfilment of OT narrative of creation, liberation, reconciliation,
 - whose kingdom has commenced- a state where all are welcome accepted
 - The Jesus who heals,, never turns anyone away-
 - who has a special place in his heart for a neutered, black foreigner- just as much as he has one for the likes of Philip himself

- Imagine the impact would have on this individual, how it turns his whole expectations totally round..
 - After all he has experienced, suddenly there is hope, purpose –
 - a calling, an opportunity to belong, an opportunity for a whole new way of being.
- They pass a stream or a pool.
 - The stranger turns to Philip and asks. “Look here is some water, is there any reason to stop me being baptised right now?”
- Philip doesn't hesitate, they get down from the chariot and the church welcomes their first African.
 - Jesus' call to go preach good news to samaria, the whole world moves one step further on
 - His work of healing, accepting, restoring continues.
- So many messages we can draw from this encounter
- Rigid rules no longer in place- rule of love applies eternally
- Excluded are welcome and accepted- the exclusion is drowned in baptism, rising to new life of acceptance, back into the family, into the Kingdom
- Eunuch represents all that Jesus came for-
 - sheep outside the fold,
 - the one in need of healing,
 - Place at table for outcasts
 - Liberation for those deprived of justice within oppressive social systems- His homecoming feels like a replay of the Exodus narrative all over again
- I know that Joanna would like a sermon series on Matt 5, Sermon on the Mount-
 - well here is someone comforted as he mourns for his loss, receives the righteousness he hungers for, the reviled whose physical state and nationality becomes irrelevant as he commences a new life through the waters of baptism
 - Note how God chooses to do this through us, his partners in salvation.
 - This whole encounter happens because Philip is the right partner for the moment
 - He really is an exceptional character
- If look at 1st century map of the Middle East, you would see that Philip when in Samaria had almost made it home to Caesarea.
 - Why double back south west and end up standing round on this wilderness road in middle of nowhere?
- Similarly why put yourself out for a mutilated foreigner, risk your reputation within the church?
 - Samaritans may be one thing, but baptising this Ethiopian Eunuch is whole new ball game.
 - “Have I considered all the angles here, is this going to cause ruptions back at church HQ?. It would be much easier, much safer to suggest they return to Jerusalem and speak with Peter, James, John – let them make the call”
- Why was Philip there? Why did he step outside the box and baptise?
- The only answer we can give is that he had embraced God so deeply into his own life,
 - and so was open to hear and respond with confidence as the Spirit guided him.
- And the Spirit is certainly there, directing, influencing, preparing the scene
 - placing the scroll of Isaiah in the eunuch's hands at that time.

- A scroll that continues in 56.1-7 to say :- “....let no foreigners who have bound themselves to The Lord say the Lord will surely exclude me from his people... No eunuch complain I am only a dry tree.... To them i will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name...joy in my house of prayer....house of prayer for all nations
- Does that phrase “house of prayer” ring any bells
 - It should do- Jesus himself used it as he symbolically cleansed temple-
 - not of foreigners -but chancers charlatans,
 - people who were perverting its very purpose for commercial gain.
- So through the prayerfully aware and obedient Philip, Jesus welcomes this particular foreigner into the new holy temple of his presence in the world- his church
 - Another point to note is that this passage gives that feeling of being open ended, part of an ongoing a continuum
- The eunuch goes on his way rejoicing- in fact if church tradition has credence, he took gospel home with him-
- Irenaus the 2nd century Church Father wrote, "This man (Simeon Bachos the Eunuch) was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this (God) had already made (His) appearance in human flesh, and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter; and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him."
 - non heterosexual/ sexually other becomes missional leader to a nation
 - And as for Philip- he is irrepressible. Finding himself carried (led) homewards to Caesarea he is still busily preaching as he passes through Azotus.
- In her commentary Jane Williams imagines Philip saying “To pass through Azotus without opportunity to show people love of God- are you mad?”
 - This man of faith directly grafted into life of God just keeps on spotting opportunities which most of us would be blind to
- Philip obeyed- went where he was led, happy to be useful.
 - Why would a good jewish boy want to go and spend time with those dreadful samarians,
 - Why would he want to go walking off a grotty desert road near Gaza,south west of Jerusalem, back to home comforts were back up in Caesarea
 - We see him taken role of deacon, the back room job so that others freed up to do the better stuff
- But let’s be realistic, a big part of our challenge is that the call to discipleship is actually counter to our culture-
 - nowadays we all expect to be a success, the one to make OUR mark-
 - to lead not to follow, to be in control rather than obedient
- Havent got many quick and ready solutions to the challenge of modern culture ,
 - but one thing is sure- it is something we need to always bear in mind as we try and show Christ to our contemporaries.
- Can I close by considering the central place of scripture in this story. For Philip’s contemporaries this was a library of their history, their poetry, the place that defined how they structured themselves as society.
- But far more than that it was the narrative of how God had and continues to engage with his creation, particularly through his people Israel.

- It was their written narrative of how man's rebellion from God's chosen path for them had led to disaster and corruption,
 - yet how God continued to raise up certain individuals to bring things back on course-
 - like Moses the leader from exile, David the kingly hero, Nehemiah the restorer of Jerusalem.
- And a key element of this narrative witness are the prophets, God's messengers, who through prayerfully looking at what was happening around them, develop a perception of where things are leading to,
 - which they use to warn and encourage.
 - The author(s) of Isaiah, writing around the time of Babylonian exile fall in this prophetic tradition
- They see that Israel cannot fulfil mission to be a blessing upon creation alone
 - That it will require someone special to come forward who could take on the wrongs of the entire world and shortcomings of Israel,
 - Someone who will do this regardless of the cost to himself and thereby bring in a new covenant,
 - one of healing what is broken, restored relationships between God and humanity
- If you like this section of Isaiah is a sort of job description, a role for which God sends his own son Jesus
- Since Philip was immersed in his scripture he was able to use it to express the transforming significance of Jesus to this poor excluded Ethiopian,
 - to make Jesus relevant to his particular situation.
- With addition of NT we of course have a bigger library of scripture.
 - The place where the job description and promise has become fulfilled in a person
 - whose life is described in the gospels
 - and whose significance and implications is communicated across his faith community by letter, epistles.
- This scripture (bible) is God's gift to us
 - to be used as Paul says for guidance, teaching, a yardstick, to test behaviours against-
 - an essential asset for living and drawing close to Christ.
- But sometimes I think scripture can be part of both problem and solution
- Can we turn to v30,31 –"Do you understand what you are reading?"
 - "how can I unless someone guides me?"
- In many ways we are no different to that Ethiopian. The message of Scripture is of limited value unless we can GET it, understand-
 - that it has resonances in our experience, relevance.
 - Then and only then does it become alive- do we hear God speaking through it.
- Now Roger prefers RSV, which he tells me is really sound version as opposed to this nearly really sound one in our pews,
 - Neil generally prefers NIV, as he regards the RSV is only Reasonably Sound
 - Paul Kidd would argue for the language of the Authorised Version
- We jest about these things, but there is a serious point.

- Whether we are referring to the bible or a book on gardening different ways of phrasing things get through to different people.
- So showing some flexibility in the way we express scripture's message can be potent when we wish to communicate
- For it isn't actually the words of scripture chosen by translators, and arguably by the human authors that is God's blessing to us, his good news-
 - rather it is the person of Jesus, God here as one of us and his message of welcome, love, restoration that shines out as the Good News.
 - Scriptures aren't magical books but a vehicle to bring this across to us, the record and library of the great narrative.
- Let me read you today's passage from the Kiwi Bible *<a version written in New Zealand vernacular for young people >*
- Now I know it is a paraphrase,
 - but in different words it fully expresses the encounter on the Gaza road,
 - Christ shines through in a way far more relevant to a NZ teenager, its target audience than KJV anyway
- That is what Philip was doing that day- bringing Christ to someone in a manner that related to his culture, his circumstances.
 - Surely if we are now Philip's successors, Christ's followers and proclaimers to our time and place,
 - we also need to be always looking for the best, most relevant way to express Him

As we go from here, let's take the example set by two very different people.

- One an outsider who in his journey of faith had encountered rejection for all sorts of reasons, but never gave up until his perseverance was rewarded with acceptance and welcome.
 - Who experienced the reality of the promise that if you knock long enough the door will be opened, ask and you shall receive.
- The other an obedient, faithful and enthusiastic disciple-
 - the man grafted into his Lord, ready and willing to serve in any and every capacity he was called to, whether as a backroom deacon or a front line evangelist at the margins of the kingdom.
 - The irrepressible enthusiast who served Christ in all he met and wanted to bring Christ to all he met
- Two people for whom the good news announced by Jesus proved to be totally life changing and fulfilling. Who heard, believed and followed.
- The question is are we prepared with God's help to do the same?

Note: Sources used while preparing this talk included the following:

- Tom Wright – Acts for Everyone
- Brian McLaren- A New Kind of Christianity
- Jane Williams- Lectionary Reflections Year B
- Chris Grantham – Bits of... The Kiwi Bible