

5th Sunday of Easter - 2nd May 2021 - Acts 8:26-end John 15:1-8

Acts 8:26 ²⁶ But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south[Ⓜ] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." **This is a desert road.** ²⁷ **And he rose and went.** And behold, **an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister** of the Can'dace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." ³⁰ So **Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"** ³¹ And he said, "**How can I, unless someone guides me?**" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:

"As a sheep led to the slaughter
or a lamb before its shearer is dumb,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken up from the earth."

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and **beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus.** ³⁶ And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?"[Ⓜ] ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and **went on his way rejoicing.** ⁴⁰ But Philip was found at Azo'tus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesare'a.

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, **for apart from me you can do nothing.** ⁶ If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ **By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Go south young man! Don't look back. It's desert all the way, barren and wild. Look out for a man in a chariot. You don't know him from Adam but he's an important guy whose religious dreams have been overturned. He's not unhappy though. In fact, he's reading from a Scripture scroll as he travels; he just needs the help only you can give so he understands what he's reading. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Philip gets the job done: *'Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus'*. Philip's explanation drew an image of Jesus as the Suffering Servant, the true Israelite, *'Israel reduced to one'*, states Walter Brueggemann, a Hebrew scholar.

The unnamed man, an Ethiopian, was a highly valued, intellectually astute person, whose integrity, authority and lack of male sexuality defined his role as keeper of his Queen's Treasures. It seems he was on a pilgrimage of sorts, a visit to the Holy Land, as he wanted to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Spoiler alert: this trip, one-way, would take around 84 hours in a car!

Having arrived at the Temple, he found he was an 'outsider'; not because of his skin colour but because of his choice of sexuality. He was initially welcomed but then excluded from Temple ritual and participation in the Israelite community. Turning around for the long journey back, he was not downhearted because he was able to seek God through Scripture. He could read Hebrew but not understand its meaning. Cue Philip drawing near. The Ethiopian was welcomed again, this time through baptism. He was not excluded because of his choice of sexuality. Judaism's 'outsider' became Jesus' 'insider'.

'Outsiders' and 'insiders' – are these phrases helpful? Maybe they invite us to recognise our own use of labels? If so, are they relevant or do they create unnecessary boundaries? Did Jesus use labels or create boundaries around people? I wonder, do we know who the 'Ethiopian outsiders' are in our villages? As the people of God in our villages, what could we do to draw them nearer to Jesus and invite them to be baptised?

Let's reflect for a moment, on the imagery of the true vine. At the beginning of each season a vine must be pruned right back and trained along a trellis, an almost daily and painstaking job. It's vital work for each vine; having enough space, sun and rain needed for seasonal fruit to be safeguarded takes much investment. Older, more sturdy vines can have newer vines grafted into them. *'I am the vine, said Jesus, 'you are the branches...apart from me you can do nothing'*. This was what the Ethiopian experienced at his baptism, he needed to be grafted to Jesus.

At this point, you may have noticed two elephants in the room, one to do with skin colour and the other about identity and sexuality.

In my Church of England infants' school, I had a black teacher. As a five-year-old I didn't understand this meant anything. She was my kind, lovely and clever teacher. I know now that, back in 1963, she was much more than a teacher, she was a black pioneer, full of hope for our futures and for the futures of her own children. Her courage was immense.

More recently, a friend was lighting a candle in church when a man popped in to pick up the Parish Magazine. He said he had never been in the building before because he felt he would be asked to leave because he was gay. My friend welcomed him and encouraged him and his partner to attend a future service. How much courage do you think he will need to go back?

In November 2020, the '*Living in Love and Faith*' Report was published by Church of England to discuss areas around identity and sexuality. Two weeks ago, '*From Lament to Action*' was published, specifying 47 actions for different parts of the Church to implement around the United Kingdom's Minority Ethnic or UKME group. This includes employing a Racial Justice Officer in every UK diocese and, when shortlisting for new job roles, including I hope our new Bishop, at least one suitable UKME applicant. As well as apologising for the Church of England's lack in these areas of its ministry, Justin Welby and senior clergy have initiated actions to prune the vine right down to its base by addressing long-standing injustices still prevalent in UK.

Two centuries after the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian these subjects still cause havoc. Do we feel shame about this or do we choose to respond to the opportunities offered to get things right now? Are our churches really welcoming or do we exclude with sideways glances or judgemental stares, rather than seeing everyone through the eyes of Jesus? As we move out of pandemic many people are going to need a safe space to grieve all kinds of losses. Will they be welcomed with or without labels? Jesus invites us to work with him, '*apart from me you can do nothing*' so let's take the opportunity to partner with him, offering ourselves as grafting places for new vines. The Father and His Son are the Gardeners who will prune where no fruit is found, but only to encourage fruitfulness in next season. That next season is here! So, let's praise God, in the Spirit, as the Ethiopian did, rejoicing all the way home as we take time to deepen our thinking and turn our lamenting into action.

God of deep soil and luxuriant growth; You call us from our shallow selves to find our depth in you. May we abide in God alone, who can teach us who we are, through Jesus Christ, the true vine. Amen