Sermon for 5th after Easter Year B

Readings: Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-8

i

I am going to start by speaking of something you will probably not like to think about: eunuchs.

The important thing to know about eunuchs is that the important thing is missing.

What you also need to know is that it was a widespread practice in the ancient world to have eunuchs in places of privilege and power, particularly in royal households where women would have been about, so that you could appoint men to these positions who could be relied upon not to misbehave. So on the one hand, they had been treated as objects, robbed of dignity and their human rights – yet on the other hand they could then be put in places of power and privilege.

Such is this eunuch from the royal court of the Queen of Ethiopia. He is the finance minister of the country: a man of some power and prestige – and yet a eunuch.

This particular man was also a Jew. There were many Jews living outside Israel at that time and Ethiopia had a significant Jewish community. So he had come all the way to Jerusalem, not on some diplomatic business, or to attend some 1st century economic summit, but expressly to worship God in the Temple, the holiest place on earth, and to be there for the Jewish Feast of Weeks, originally a harvest festival, but later the commemoration of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Sinai. It was also known as Pentecost, for it fell 50 days after the Passover.

Yet despite his official diplomatic prestige and his Jewish faith and ancestry, and although he had travelled all the way from Ethiopia, when he got to the Temple he would have been forbidden entry. For according to the Torah, those who have been dismembered are not allowed into the Temple. If you’re wondering, the Law is Deuteronomy 23:1 – one of the few passages we lads at the Grammar school could always find you. Most Religious Studies lessons someone would read out the section about, “he whose male member has been cut off…”

As a eunuch for all his adult life, he would have been recognisable as such without any need for intimate body searches like we get in the airports today.

Although he truly belonged, he would have been treated as an outsider; and he would always be an outsider. There was no way to redeem his situation. He was an outcast forever.

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Perhaps that is why he is reading Isaiah 53 about the servant of God who was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, a man with no dignity or beauty that people should notice him, to be ignored as if he was nothing.

Yet the Scripture held out a faint hope; for the suffering servant of God in Isaiah can offer his suffering to God, even his death and God will use that innocent pain to redeem the people from their sins. He will be given a place of honour in God’s house and again know the joy of the Lord.

Perhaps the Ethiopian was taking a degree of comfort in that passage; he could hardly have anticipated that God would act there and then.

Yet God sent Philip, by the Spirit, to that same desert road. People have often wondered why the Ethiopian was on the quieter, desert road rather than the main road, but perhaps he didn’t want to be seen. Perhaps his humiliation at the Temple had already been far too public.

God knew exactly where to find him. No one can sink so low into sadness, depression, pain or loneliness that God loses track of where you are.

Nor is God ever without some loyal, Spirit-filled person through whom Jesus can work to bring comfort or relief.

So Philip explains the Isaiah passage in reference to the rejected, suffering and dying Christ. Being baptized into the new life of Christ enables the Ethiopian to find inclusion in the new Israel and a role to play on behalf of Christ which will be remembered always. For we Christians still read his story from the Scriptures and the Ethiopian church trace their history to the work of this man.

He is another example in the same fashion as Christ, a stone the people rejected, now promoted to be a cornerstone of God’s new temple.

The NT is full of such unlikely people being called to the royal service of Christ the King of kings. Christ calls tax collectors, fishermen, gentiles, former prostitutes and grafts them onto the true vine of Israel to be the New Israel, the new temple, the new People of God.

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This is the Good News of Jesus Christ: there are no little people who do not matter. There are no people who are of the wrong type, colour, class, gender, profession, health or wealth who can be told they have no place and no part to play.

We all need to hear that affirmation from time to time; that our lives are not without purpose or value, even if the world turns its back on you, God will not. Having even a small part to play in a great cause is better than being a big wheel in an enterprise of little value.

This is subversive stuff the world over. It took time, for people holding places of privilege and power naturally resisted this aspect of the Gospel even after professing Christian faith themselves, but eventually it turned the world upside down, as the citizens of Thessalonica first acknowledged in Acts 17:6.

Eventually, the Gospel demolishes slavery and racism and sexism. The Gospel challenges all forms of discrimination and oppression. It also cries out for the poor and marginalised in society and questions the tremendous gap between the rewards of the average worker and the super-elite.

When we are in fellowship with Christ, we have been grafted on to the true and living vine. Therefore our labours will bear fruit.

This is also an affirmation that we all need to hear from time to time, especially those of us who have lived through difficult times in the Church and have at times despaired of the future, whilst at the same time knowing that the future is secure in God’s hand.

Even in the difficult years of the past century, the World Methodist membership has grown by a million people a year and has done so for the last 30 years or so. We all need to hear a bit of encouragement now and then.

Jesus promises that our small contribution, our pitiful couple of fish and 5 barley loaves (John 6.9), our widow’s mite (Mark 12.42), our grain of salt will not be despised, but in Christ, the True Vine, shall one day produce a fruitful harvest.

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