Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 2nd May 2021

Readings: I John 4.7-21, Acts 8.26-40, John 15.1-8

Maybe we've all experience of feeling different from those around us. I certainly did at school, where the thing we had in common was that we were all boys who had failed the 11 plus. That was indeed a great leveller, which was really valuable preparation for ministry. But, as a carefully coached boy treble, I was certainly aware that South London patois was more common than a chorister's Received Pronunciation in the playground. I do not for one moment say that I was bullied, but I was frequently teased, for singing, for my accent, for being useless at every conceivable sport – and I really do mean 'useless' - and for preferring suits to jeans and T-shirts. Come to think of it, I suppose playing Cousin Hebe in *H.M.S. Pinafore* didn't help much, either.

Maybe you have stories of feeling different, too. They could be as simple as mine: your accent, your hobbies, your dress sense. Or maybe it's been more profound than that - your race group, your nationality, your gender identity, your religion? Maybe, perhaps, even that you know what it is to have a senior management role, which risks making you different from those around you; or a menial role, which left you feeling like you were no-one at all.

Feeling different, I can imagine, could have been the experience of the person whom Philip met on the road south west out of Jerusalem towards Gaza. The way St Luke describes this character make them unlike others. It seems they may always have known what it was to be different, and different in some ways that still shape and influence so many people's lives today.

First, as an Ethiopian he was in Judea as a **foreigner,** a Gentile travelling amongst Jewish people. How well we know the distinction that bestowed upon him. And how well we know the impact of being foreign in today's world. Our own country is not least amongst those to which people come from places like Myanmar, the Yemen and Afghanistan, seeking refuge and safety, and often find it, feeling more free, more prosperous, more safe, more hopeful here than at home in the bosom of the family. But too many – some in their second or third generation here - tell of how they haven't found anything like that – at least, not consistently as they have sought refuge in these islands. We hear again this week of that institutional racism which highlights the unacceptable marginalising that people already feel, which is why they came I the first place, and which shames us as a nation.

Secondly, coming from Ethiopia, this person was of black skin, part of what we now know to be the **global majority.** The recent request that we desist from the acronym BAME – Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic - is an important request. It reminds us that being black or brown might mean being in the minority in the United Kingdom, but across the world it is to be the mainstream. On the Gaza road, in a predominantly white nation, this black Ethiopian would have been visibly different – maybe exotic, but as our own generation reveals, too easily excluded, and prejudiced against.

Thirdly, this traveller is described as a **eunuch**. Now that is an exotic word, too. We tend to think it means castrated, and it certainly can. That alone would have given the Ethiopian a sexual identity that not everyone around them understood or appreciated. They'd have been different, disregarded. Whatismore, in a society shaped by the Jewish law, it could well specifically have excluded this person from the religious privileges of Israel. Deuteronomy 23 is clear: people castrated 'shall not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.' 23.1 That said, none of this is straightforward. Isaiah 56.3-5 hints at the later removal of this ban, which might explain how such a one as this castrated Ethiopian would have 'come to worship', in Jerusalem, (8.27) and have been reading aloud from a copy of the scroll of Isaiah. (8.30) Nevertheless, whether or not that Hewish law in Deuteronomy was being revised there are many today, 2000 years later, whose authentic and life-giving reality is in being

LGBTQIA+, and who are often discriminated against in a way that those who aren't can only begin to imagine.

Eunuch, however, is not always a word to talk about those who are castrated. Ernst Haenchen suggests 'eunuch' could also mean a high political or military officer. That could fit with the idea that the Ethiopian pilgrim was an important personage back home. Luke tells us he was a court official of the Candace, a queen mother type figure, who ruled the Ethiopians in that part of the country. It appears the official was some sort of Chancellor of the Exchequer – certainly with position; they were, as Acts put it, 'in charge of her entire treasury'. So maybe this one's difference was less to do with sexual identity and more to do with the isolation that comes with position, with status, with responsibility. In this era of pandemic, we may not always agree with those who Govern but we can surely appreciate their need for prayer in the isolation and vulnerability of high office.

So we have met with a foreigner, a black person, who is a eunuch, whatever we choose to see eunuch as meaning. There's enough difference there to imply how easily this one could have been marginalised. And there's one final sign of it. We don't know this person's name. We know the name of the person who stops the chariot to speak about Jesus – it's Philip. Earlier in chapter 8, we learn of a magician who thought so highly of himself that he was called Great, and we are told his name; it's Simon. In the next chapter there's a two-verse account of Peter healing a man who had been bedridden for eight years. In just forty words we learn his name twice: it's Aeneas. But the Ethiopian eunuch remains nameless. Now, of course, it may just be that Luke didn't know his name, or that as he came to write Acts, he had forgotten it. But if he remembered the names of Philip, Simon, and Aeneas, why not this person's, about whom we get such an intimate, detailed and relatively lengthy account? It feels like a particularly poignant way of depicting exclusion.

So, for me, this story illustrates the capacity for society then and society today to marginalise people, and to marginalise them for all sorts of reasons that are actually about their identity and their lifestyle, their status – be it high or low - and about their role.

And so to the Good News. When Philip runs up to the chariot, he hears the Ethiopian Eunuch reading from what we now know as Isaiah 53. It's the bit where the suffering servant is described as being 'like a sheep [who] was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer. In his humiliation, justice was denied him,' says St Luke. At the eunuch's request, Philip clambers aboard the chariot and uses Isaiah's words to give him a way into explaining the good news of Jesus. The very one who in humiliation had justice denied him, Jesus, as Peter interprets the story, was able by force of grace and love to restore justice and embrace to other humiliated and marginalised ones. Something in that whole story resonated with the eunuch. It's as if he wanted the gift of dignity and acceptance and embrace for his marginalised self, and so asks for baptism – baptism as the sign and seal that we are God's and God is ours, with nothing that will exclude us.

I find here a rich story of the love that God has for us, even when the world does not love us. How God counters the world's exclusion with the divine embrace. The other readings in this service make the direct and logical point that if that is how God loves us, then so should we strive to love one another. The writer of I John is not naïve. It is not assumed that we automatically and authentically love one another as Christ loves us. In one of Scripture's most memorable metaphors, God's love in us is perfected and one might imply, only perfected, as we are engrafted into Christ – like a plant grafted onto a root plant, in order to bear the root plant's fruit. The vine and its grapes as John 15 has it

And such is our Baptism – it's the outward sign of that inner, spiritual process whereby we are enabled to abide in God through Christ, with the ultimate purpose of fulfilling the new commandment, to love as we are loved.

Sometimes true love has to be as self-sacrificing as Jesus's was. It is far from easy. I think of the long-term commitment of a parent to a dependent child, or of partners to a spouse as their

relationship is re-defined by old age. True love may even be humbling, in the way that cleaning an incontinent person is humbling, until the act of restoring the incontinent person's dignity somehow enhances our own. But that of course is the nature of love. It might bring joy to us as we show it, but is not its purpose also to give life to those who receive it?

New life, through Christ: that's what Philip gave to the eunuch through the gifts of his teaching and then of Baptism. How I wish we knew the name with which Philip baptised the Ethiopian. Had we read on in John 15, just a few more verses, we'd have heard the famous words of Jesus: 'I do not call you servants any longer; I have called you friends.' (John 15.15) So I like to think of Philip saying, 'I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and I name you, "Friend".'

So may we know ourselves as friends of God, as friends of each other, and especially as friends of those whose life has left them feeling friendless. Thus will God be glorified, and our joy be complete. Amen