

Worship 25th April
Aberlour Parish Church
Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Call to Worship

Foreigners; strangers; seekers. The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian is the story of outreach. The story of how for God there are no barriers; no outcasts; no strangers. For us in our church, in our community this is often a challenge and can test us to the limits.

Can we, like Philip, be bold enough to speak to the stranger in our midst; can we welcome, affirm and share God's love with those we meet, thus enabling them to experience the joy and fellowship of Christ?

Prayer of approach, confession and Lord's Prayer

God of community,
you bring us together
week by week,
one body, one people.
No one is more special than the rest.

Each of us is a treasured part of your church.
Jesus, teacher,
we come each week
longing to learn more about you,
wanting to be more like you.
Each of us is here with something to learn
and something to offer you back.

Engaging Spirit,
you find us wherever we are,
at home, at work, out shopping
and today at worship.
You have time for each of us,
enough for each of us.

Lord,
like the Ethiopian eunuch,
we don't always have it understood,
we too need to be honest about the parts
we don't understand.
Help us get it right,
help us understand.
And forgive us for those times
we fail spectacularly and
end up letting you down.

Pick us up from those moments,
teach us afresh what it means
to live in you and with this
community of believers.

Pick us up, dust us down
and set us back on the right track.
All this we pray in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Hymn CH4 624

- 1 In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.
- 2 In Christ shall true hearts everywhere
their high communion find,
his service is the golden cord
close-binding human kind.
- 3 Come, brothers, sisters of the faith,
whate'er your race may be :
whoever does my Father's will
is surely kin to me.
- 4 In Christ now meet both east and west,
in him meet south and north,
all Christ-like souls are one in him,
throughout the whole wide earth.

John Oxenham, pseud. (1852–1941)
William Arthur Dunkerley (1852–1941)(*alt.*)

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Reading – Acts 8:26-39

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Reflection

Last week I attended a conference that I'd be due to go on this time last year – indeed give a paper at last year- but was postponed. Odd how things that were postponed for a year -back then in the hope that everything would be normal – are still happening virtually in a climate that is anything but normal.

The conference was for the Society of Study of Theology, and is the largest conference for academic theology in the UK. I don't say that to 'big up' my being there – but because of the conference theme and two recurrent themes I heard from other folks' papers. The theme title was 'Theology at the borders' which was interpreted in vast numbers of ways: but -and this is the first thing I picked out over and over again – one really prominent focus was the around the question of how theology, how Christian thought, practice and the Church are called to be with those at the margins.

Our reading today is a reading about an encounter at the border.

It is a reading about the early church being at the margins.

The other theme that came up over and over again – was the idea of human bodies, and how our bodies act as ways of putting us one side or another of -often invisible- social borders. Whether through skin colour, and borders of race; or physical or cognitive disability – and borders of accessibility; or gender where the often standard ideas of society about what a 'man' is, and what a 'woman' is put up profound borders for many.

When we meet people, before we open our mouths to speak, our body – and other people's perception of it – places us in some way. And often 'inside' or 'outside' of some sort of social border.

Some of you know I've been struggling through a PhD while training for ministry – a PhD that is yet far from finished, but which thinks about what it means to be Human, in the context and experience of dementia. One of the things I'm convinced of is that understanding our humanity through the mind and its abilities is completely inadequate: and that focussing on the body a bit more helps us correct false ideas that in dementia people lose something essential to being human. Amidst memory loss and all the other tragedies of dementia, we never stop being the person that God made us, even if we forget who we are. And so whether it's dancing, or the tapping of feet to music, or joining in with hymns we've known since we were wee, or balloons or blowing bubbles or anything of the other things that our bodies find joy in – bodies hold

a key to showing love when our minds are struggling. And of course that's true for everyone – not just those with dementia.

Given that bodies are so important; we turn to the story of our reading realising that the person Philip approaches on the chariot, is a person whose body has told a story about him his whole life.

The Ethiopian Eunuch.

We're told much about him: that he is a very important person in his homeland – in charge of the treasury of the Kandake. The Kandakes were warrior queens – heads of the Meroitic people whose lands were not where we call modern day Ethiopia, but in the middle and higher courses of the Nile, South Egypt and Northern Sudan today. The Meroites were a matriarchal people the Kandake was the ruler– and an empire of many centuries whose achievements were at least as important as their northern neighbours the Egyptians. So this Eunuch is very important and has access to great wealth. We get a double hint at that because he's carrying and reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Scrolls, books, writing of any kind, were among the most prized and expensive items of the day. The time and labour involved made them exclusive objects – and not normally the sort of thing you just carry in a chariot.

And we're told he was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem. So there is a good chance he was a Jew; or at least a seeker – who wanted to worship the One God of Jerusalem.

But he was also An Ethiopian Eunuch.

He was black. Which marked him out as 'different' – again his body speaking for him.

And he was a Eunuch. Which also would have been obvious visually: his castration would have denied him a male puberty, so he'd be shorter than other men, slighter – without the broadening out of puberty – and unlike the default for men of the time, he would be unable to grow a beard. When he spoke, his voice would be unbroken. His body spoke for him.

And he'd been to the Temple in Jerusalem. A Temple which divided genders, and which had a special area, nearer the Holy of Holies, for men only. The Eunuch would not be allowed in that area.

This is a man whose body singles him out as different. As on the margins – despite his wealth and social status – this was a man who knew well what it was not to fit in. His path through life, while no doubt surrounded by people, and people who were eager to do his bidding – was likely lonely. There would be very few others who would know what it was like to be him; it's lonely at the top – and he was at the top – it's lonely when you're different – and he was different; it's lonely when folk don't understand you – and people didn't understand his story.

And yet God – through the Holy Spirit directing Philip come alongside this man. God directs Philip to show this man love and kindness and tolerance. God directs Philip to make it clear that God is for him: God is on the side of the 'outsider'; Jesus lived, and died, and rose again for those whose bodies mark them out as different.

And let's not forget that the bodily differences this Ethiopian Eunuch bore, came with danger. We know that those who stick out from the crowd, often find that the crowd moves against them. Discrimination, Abuse, Violence, Isolation. There's only so much wealth and status can protect you from, I'd guess he knew all of these far too well.

He certainly would today. Discrimination, Abuse, Violence and Isolation are the experiences of untold numbers of people who – like our guy – exist in a racial minority; or in a minority of gender expression.

We live in a world where it's necessary to say, and say out loud and with our actions over and over again that Black Lives Matter. Because the experiences of Black folk -in the US but also in the UK and Scotland – is of

a society that treats them as if they don't matter. This week saw the conviction of the murderer of George Floyd, the conviction of a police officer whose racism and unconstrained power made it possible for an innocent man to be killed. And very nearly for that murder to happen with impunity. In this same week in the UK it has been Stephen Lawrence day: where the inquest into the police's handling of the racist murder of tennage Stephen Lawrence found the entire MET police to be 'institutionally racist'. In Scotland, Sheku Bayoh lost his life in while in police custody in Kirkcaldy. There remains an open government inquest into the circumstance of his death. These are not isolated incidents, and these are deaths which are the tragic peak of an iceberg that runs deep in terms of the Discrimination, Abuse and violence that black – and indeed, all folk of minority ethnic background - experience.

And that's before touching the gender aspect of identity. Our inherited social conceptions of gender are wrong if they imagine there is binary where there is one thing called 'woman' with one set of behaviours, roles, and ways-of-being; and another thing called 'man' with one other set of behaviours, roles, and ways of being.

There has never been a point in human history where it has been like that. There may have been a dominant majority understanding of a binary for long stretches of time: but even within that the roles, behaviours, and expectations of men and women have changed drastically- in our reading, against a world of male emperors and kings, the Kandakes were warrior women, heads of their tribes and empire.

And there have always been folk who don't fit in those two boxes. In our reading that's the Eunuch: male in terms of the organs he was born with: but going on to live a life which didn't fit with the normal expectation of 'male' – who would be denied access to worship god with the men at Jerusalem.

Today there are people who don't fit neatly into two boxes called male and female. There are those whose gender doesn't fit with the organs they were born with; there are those who don't identify as male or female. The lives of transgender and non-binary folk – are hopefully, today, less difficult than they once were: there is at least more space and understanding in society today than there was even 10 years ago. But the experiences of many remain dominated by Discrimination, Abuse, Violence and Isolation.

Just as Philip was called alongside the Ethiopian Eunuch to make plain the love of God for him; we as Christ's body today, are called alongside those whose bodies tell a story of difference, and the Holy Spirit demands of us to make the love of Christ real for them.

All bodies find their home in Christ's body.

There is a tragedy and a joy in how the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch ends.

After hearing Philip proclaim the good news about Jesus, the Eunuch says: "Look here is water! What is to prevent me being baptised?"

The phrasing of this question tells the story of the tragedy. He doesn't ask: Can I be baptised? Will you baptise me? It's not a direct question. It's: What is to prevent me...?

This is a man who has been told his whole life exactly what is to prevent him doing this or doing that. He is returning from worshipping at Jerusalem, where presumably some temple official told him exactly what prevented him entering closer to the Holy of Holies.

There is a resignation, and an expectation behind his question to Philip. He expects Philip to tell him why, sure God loves him, but no – no you can't have baptism. There is a lifetime of stories of discrimination behind the way the Eunuch asks.

Today, those who have lives in common with the Ethiopian eunuchs, know something similar. Folk who come to the church, and ask us, with that same sense of half-hope, half resignation to having the door shut in their face again:

What is to prevent me being married? What is to prevent me becoming a minister? An Elder? What is to prevent me living out the faith in my God the way I have been called?

Is it because my body is different?

In many parts of our of our church, in many parts of the world, the answer is yes – we are excluding you because your body is different.

And we have to ask ourselves: How comfortable are we with that?

Or to rephrase – because for those of us with so-called ‘normal’ bodies, we are probably just as ‘comfortable’ either way: How do we live with ourselves knowing that there are things and places we have access to that those who are ‘different’ don’t?

Too many tragedies today that echo the tragedy behind the Eunuch’s questions.

All bodies find their home in Christ’s body.

I said there was tragedy, but also that there is a joy too.

Philip baptised the Eunuch.

And another child of God received the riches of heaven and went away rejoicing.

We must be the Philips of the world. We must, guided by the Holy Spirit, be those who in word and action bring joy to those who have known the tragedy of discrimination, abuse, violence and Isolation.

We must proclaim the good news of Jesus – in word and action – in welcome and embrace of love – to anyone who asks us: “What is to prevent me....”

Where there are barriers that prevent... we must act to break them down.

Because nothing that prevents a child of God living their faith is of God.

All bodies find their home in Christ’s body.

Amen

Hymn CH4 544

- 1 When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there ?
When I needed a neighbour, were you there ?
*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter;
were you there ?*
- 2 I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there ?
I was hungry and thirsty, were you there ?
- 3 I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there ?
I was cold, I was naked, were you there ?

- 4 When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there ?
When I needed a shelter, were you there ?
- 5 When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there ?
When I needed a healer, were you there ?
- 6 Wherever you travel I'll be there, I'll be there,
wherever you travel I'll be there.
*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
I'll be there.*

Sydney Bertram Carter (1915–2004)

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Prayers for others and ourselves

Lord,
life can be hard,
it can be confusing.
It can be hurtful and nasty,
fearful and terrible,
tiring and just plain ghastly.

Lord we could give up
but we don't.
Because we know that
life can be good,
it can be fun and beautiful,
it can be joyous and full,
full of love and happiness.

Oh that it could be like this for everyone.

So today we pray
for those who find life hard
that they may find some clear way
through the difficulties they face.

We pray for those for whom life
is full of hurtful words and nastiness.
May people learn to be less hurtful and nasty.

We pray for those who live in fear
and in terrible conditions.
May a way be found for all to
live in peace and in comfort.

We pray for those for whom life
Is tiring and ghastly.
May respite from the toil they experience
be found in the support of others.

May we find ways
of reaching out like Philip

and accepting people where they are at,
teaching them your ways
and not the world's ways.

May we walk with people
through their hard and dark times,
shining some of your light into their lives.
Help us Lord.

Amen

Hymn CH4 706

- 1 For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord ;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.
- 2 Lead us forward into freedom,
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.
- 3 All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned ;
pride of status, race, or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.
- 4 You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind ;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind ;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Fred Kaan (*b.* 1929)

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Sending and blessing

Let us go from here
to be a friend to the stranger in our midst.
May we show and share the love of God.
May we invite others to experience
the joy and fellowship of Christ.
And as we do,
may we be encouraged and encapsulated
by the Holy Spirit.
So with the blessing of God in Trinity
may we all go in peace