

Telling God's story

Bible study on Acts 8:26-40

AIM

This is a Bible study for small groups based on Acts 8:26-40. It is a fuller version of the bible study on pages 35-39 of the Exploring Evangelism booklet (which had to be edited for reasons of space).

INTRODUCTION

In our time, when the story of Jesus is fading from public memory, there is a renewed interest among churches/Christians in telling our faith story. The shelves are stacked with books about evangelism, how to do it, how not to do, what to say, how to say it – but I don't want to go into any of that. Today I would like us to look at a wonderful story in the book of Acts, in which story telling happens on a number of levels. Our bible study really is a re-telling of Luke's story, which is a story of two people who find connection through the story of Jesus. So this is really a bible study about story telling. If the bible study had a title it would be: being touched – but more about that later.

PHILIP'S STORY – TOUCHED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Begin by reading Acts 8:26-40.

Ask the question: So whose story is this?

At the first level this is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. That's pretty straightforward.

Ask the question: What do we know about Philip?

There maybe different answers to this – accept them all to begin with and then fill in any gaps from the material below.

About Philip the apostle

First of all, that this is not the apostle Philip. After pondering this text for the last few months, and marvelling at the wonderful transformation the apostle Philip experienced through the Holy Spirit, I discovered the day before yesterday that the apostle Philip and this Philip are two different people. It always helps to read the passage carefully! And the one before that! Apparently it's a common mistake to make.

And the difference between the two Philips tells us a lot:

In Luke, Mark and Matthew the apostle Philip remains quite invisible. He is mentioned in the choice of the Twelve, but otherwise he is not seen or heard. He is a bit of a grey mouse.

In the gospel according to John, Philip comes into sharper relief: we know he is from Bethsaida, as are Peter and Andrew. He is credited as the first to recognise Jesus as the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote (John 1, 45), so we already get a sense that he is a bit of a biblical scholar. (Can you see the confusion coming?) He is also a bit of a recruiter: he finds Nathanael and tells him to come and see Jesus. But he also comes across as careful and not the most imaginative of souls: in the story of the loaves and the fishes, in John 6, Philip can't see how 200 denarii would buy enough to even begin to feed everyone (says this to the Messiah!). And he's a bit of a gatekeeper too: in chapter 12 some Greeks come to Philip to ask to see Jesus. And he has his doubts: in chapter 14 he asks Jesus for proof and Jesus says, 'Have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me?'

In Acts it's all change. First the disciples sit in the upper room to wait and pray, and then

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Pentecost happens. And in the power of the Holy Spirit the apostles go and tell others that a new age has begun in which God is going to do new things in the world. But what effect this has on Philip we are not told.

About Philip the deacon

Because the Philip that is mentioned in the book of Acts is another Philip; this is Philip the deacon turned evangelist. He was one of the seven deacons chosen to care for the poor of the Christian community in Jerusalem, in Acts 6. He's not a grey, gatekeeping, doubting disciple but a most daring evangelist, with his own personal angel who makes him go way beyond his comfort zone. He is the first to go to a Samaritan town to proclaim the Christ to them and in our story, in Acts 8, we find him on the desert road to Gaza, surely not the safest of places to be, and he isn't there at the best of times either: it's not only mad dogs and Englishmen who go out in the midday sun. But Philip is there, told to go there by the Angel of the Lord. Touched by the Holy Spirit who tells him when he sees the chariot to go and join it. And Philip, our daring story teller, goes. Beyond his comfort zone – crossing boundaries in more ways than one – and becoming the first one to open the gospel to a non-Jew (before Paul and Peter even did it).

Question for discussion in groups:

Faith story telling is not an easy thing. Who of the two Philips do you connect with, the apostle Philip or the daring evangelist? Share with your neighbour.

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH'S STORY – NEVER TOUCHED

So, this is the story of Philip, but perhaps even more it is the story of the Ethiopian (Ethiopia, by the way, is not to be confused with modern Ethiopia, but more Sudan/Nubia to the south of Egypt). What Luke also tells us is that he was a eunuch/castrated; and it was quite common in the Ancient Near East for men who had been castrated to serve in positions of state. So it is with this man, he is the chief finance minister to the kandake, the queen. We can safely say he's rich and he's powerful.

But money and status aren't everything.

Listen to a poem, written by Lucy Berry, which gives us an insight into the life experience of the Ethiopian finance minister (Ask someone to read this out)

Treasurer to the Candace: Acts 8:26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

**Give me two pennies to rub together
and I will see they breed.
I have the talent to send money forth to multiply.**

**My Mistress,
(who is, naturally, not my mistress),
giggles she never saw any man more
well-equipped for the job.
She says no-one can touch me
for generating capital.**

**Indeed, no-one touches me;
That is the issue.**

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I go home to gold. And empty halls.
I sleep alone
generating dreams of dead ends,
cut off suddenly.

No-one stops with me here.
No-one touches me.

Only, my ancestors stop, with me, here;
where my descendants shall never begin.
For this branch bears no fruit.

No kissing, no caressing,
no cries of childbirth in my halls, no wedding feast,
no daughters whispering to their satin mother.
No plump-ankled sons, half-asleep, in my lap.
Nothing in my lap.

As I arrive at court in my silver sedan,
they titter. Intact, without tact.

What have I to love, but gold?

Or what to love with?
For that which is dead
cannot rise again.

©Lucy Berry

No one touches the Ethiopian eunuch. He has no children, no status, he will be feared and sniggered at; after all he is barren. And think of the many Bible stories you know about people who are desperate for children: Abraham and Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth. Because without children you are nothing, without offspring you don't live on, you have no life... You don't belong.

And this man who does not belong travels to Jerusalem. It is not likely that he was Jewish himself (commentators differ on this) or even a proselyte, but he was probably a so called God-fearer. He is attracted to the faith of Israel, its God and its way of life. So he goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But again, the likelihood is that his experience was one of not belonging, possibly even being turned away. Because this is what the law says about eunuchs:

"No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 23, 1 or 2)

The Law forbids eunuchs from entering the assembly of the Lord. Eunuchs do not fit in proper gender categories, so they are profane by nature. The eunuch was an outsider – forever to remain so within the Jewish system. He does not belong.

The pilgrimage will have made an impact, though, and so, on the way back he is reading Isaiah. And he comes to a passage that touches him and confuses him, Isaiah 53, 7-8. What does it mean? Who is it about? And right there and then is Philip, who touched by the Holy Spirit, comes over and asks him a simple question: 'Do you understand what you are reading?' That opens the door to a most amazing conversation in which Philip proclaims to him the good news of Jesus Christ.

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Question for discussion groups:

What touched the eunuch in what he was reading?

THE JESUS STORY – HE MAKES WITH HIS FRIENDS A TOUCHING PLACE

Begin by singing if you can:

To the lost Christ shows his face,

To the unloved he gives his embrace,

To those who cry in pain or disgrace,

Christ makes, with his friends, a touching place.

[Wild Goose]

This is also the story of Jesus. Acts is all about what Jesus is continuing to do and to teach and that's how Luke wants us to read it. It's like one of those plays where the action on stage depends on a person the audience actually never sees.

It is obvious that when the Ethiopian hears the story of Jesus he strongly connects. What is it he connects with? What is it that so strongly touches him, perhaps for the very first time. When you read interpretations of this passage many people focus on the first part of the Isaiah passage the eunuch is reading: the bit about like a lamb to the slaughterhouse and the sheep that remains dumb in front of its shearers. Who is that being said of? Who is that about? Then they come to Jesus and an easy connection with atonement for sin is made. It is a connection Luke does not make. Wherever Luke has used Mark's references of Jesus as the servant (Luke 22, 27 with Mk 10,45 and Luke 22, 19 with Mark 14,24) he leaves out any references to notions of ransom for many; poured out for many. What this tells us is that the story of Jesus offers different connections for different people. There are many ways into the gospel, for the gospel is much broader and much deeper than we often make it.

There is, of course, another half to the quotation:

"In his humiliation fair judgment was denied him. Who will ever talk about his descendants, since his life on earth has been cut short."

It seems to me that this is the bit the eunuch connects with, that speaks to his heart and to his experience. This childless, excluded man reads of one whose life has also been cut short, and who has no descendants to speak of, no generation to describe. The eunuch's life story connects with the story of Jesus, the one in whom our gracious, loving God became flesh and entered our humanity. The one in whom the promises of God, of life, real life, fullness of life, life eternal have found their fulfilment. Perhaps when they were reading together, they read more of Isaiah, and a bit further on it says (56,3): "And do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." Here on a desert road to Gaza the Ethiopian hears that in Jesus he is no longer a dry tree. In Christ there is new life, eternal life, well beyond the second, third and fourth generation. His generation will live on – and at another level that became very true: later tradition has it that the Ethiopian became the first evangelist in his own native country. Note too that the first non-Jew to come to faith and baptism in Luke's great story is a black man from Africa, who then became an evangelist to Africa.

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He wants to share in that story, he wants to make the Jesus story his personal story. And so when he sees water he asks Philip: is there anything to prevent my being baptised? And Philip, who knows full well what the law says about eunuchs but who also knows that in the kingdom of God no one should be a dry tree, has no hesitation about baptising him into the community of Jesus. Unlike the apostle, he is no gate keeper. He puts nothing in his way. No preparation or probation or promises or protocol required.

And so the Jesus story is also a story of belonging – in the new community of Jesus, the kingdom of God, all are welcome. The gospel, having been preached to the outcast Samaritans, now comes to a representative of another class of people who don't belong. This story stands at the heart of the moment when the gospel is starting to go out from the Jewish world into the wider Gentile world to make it abundantly clear that whatever culture you come from, whoever you are (intact or not), whatever need, sin, exclusion or oppression you experience you are welcome in the new community of Jesus, Jesus in whom all the promises of God find their 'yes! There is a place at God's table for everyone. No wonder the Ethiopian eunuch is excited. Once doubly excluded, he is now wonderfully welcomed. He belongs.

Question for discussion groups:

What is it about Jesus' story that touches you?

THE CHURCH'S STORY/YOUR STORY – A POSTSCRIPT

Luke tells us a beautiful story of an excluded man who finds new life and welcome in the community of Jesus. He experiences for the first time the unconditional love of God. He is welcome, no matter what his culture, his status, his physical condition. That is the good news, that is the gospel the church is to proclaim, that God's love is for everyone and no human barriers (of culture, law or convention) should seek to limit it.

That is the story of the early church that Luke seeks to tell, the story of a church that spreads rapidly beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community, because it proclaims the good news that God's love is unconditional and boundless, everyone is welcome in the community of faith.

That message is radical and not easy to live by. Our natural tendencies are to limit the love of God to those we deem acceptable. The early church struggled with it, in a way that is all too familiar for us. An ancient addition in verse 37 puts an answer after the eunuch's question to be baptised: 'If you believe with all your heart, you may'.

Our daring evangelist shows us that nothing should be put in the way of those that seek God and want to belong to God's community. That is the good news. That is the story we are to tell (yes, the story of the church is continuing through us). May we, through our stories and our living, witness to that boundless love of God who calls all people to set out on the beautiful, dangerous and expansive life of faith.

Prayer

Loving God,
We thank you for the good news of your unending love. As we seek to share our faith story with others, may we reflect your love through a wider vision, a more generous spirit and a bigger heart. Amen.

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

For more material revisit the website where you will find different ways of exploring God's story and Our Story.

Acknowledgements

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HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:
Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: evangelism@vision4life.org.uk