The Gospel Heads South
Acts 8:26-40

So we're working our way through the book of Acts. And as we've seen, this book is really concerned with answering the question 'how come the gospel spread across the world as it did, and why?' And before Easter, Dariu showed us that one reason for that was that there was this wave of persecution that broke against the church, following the killing of Stephen, that scattered the disciples. But rather than that arresting the spread of the gospel, it just caused the fire to spread outside of Jerusalem and out into Judea. And one disciple in particular, a man called Philip, ended up in Samaria, where he began to proclaim the good news about Jesus to the Samaritans, many of whom were converted.

And what follows that is this story that we've just read. And it's about this same Philip and his extraordinary meeting with this Ethiopian eunuch. And we're going to see why it's extraordinary in a minute. But before we get there, I reckon there are a number of reasons why Luke tells us this story in the first place. First off, it shows us how the gospel begins to spread south, into Africa; secondly it's about the gospel leaping across another racial and social divide – it happened with the hated Samaritans, and now its crossing another divide; but thirdly, so far what we've seen is people hearing about Jesus in what we could call 'mass evangelism' – sort of 'football stadium stuff'. Peter preaching to thousands in Jerusalem, and thousands responding; Philip proclaiming Jesus to whole crowds in Samaria, and those crowds 'with one accord' Luke tells us, responding.

But here, in the story, things are very different. The gospel is still moving out into the world, but here it's one-on-one. No grandstands, no evangelistic campaigns, no PA system. The gospel spreads, but it spreads by one person talking to another person about Jesus. Which means that whether you're a already Christian, or whether you're not sure, or you're just here investigating, I reckon we can all learn from this passage.

We're going to look at three points: At the Top, but Empty; Crossing Divides; and the One who Makes it all Possible

At the Top, but Empty
Now, no doubt you've heard the expression, 'It's lonely at the top.' You're in a position of leadership, and it can be pretty lonely, because no one else really understands the pressures, or the difficulties of what you're facing. But if it can be lonely at the top, it can also be pretty empty can't it? Empty, because you've got to the top, but there are all the sacrifices you've had to make to get to there, there's everything and everyone that you've had to let go of, and say goodbye to, the price you've had to pay, to succeed. And the problem is that when you get to the top, and you've climbed the greasy pole, and you get what you've been working for and sacrificing for, you can discover that it doesn't quite satisfy you on the inside the way you thought it would. And you've been running for this prize, but you discover the prize you were running for, isn't quite all you hoped it would be; and when you're alone, at night, and that leader's mask of bravado slips a bit, there can be this feeling of emptiness.

Now, what has that got to do with this passage? Well, take a look at the guy this story's about. Listen how Luke describes him, v27: he was 'An Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.' Now, what they knew as Ethiopia, is Sudan today. So this man is

a black African. But he's also a eunuch – he's been castrated. And the reason for that was that if you wanted to succeed in the civil service of these ancient kingdoms, and you were in close contact with the royal family, you had to be castrated. So here was a man, who had made, if not *the* ultimate sacrifice, a *significant* one, one that we would blanch at, to succeed. And he's sacrificed the chance to have a family, in a culture where family was everything, to get to the top.

It's interesting isn't it? Because whilst we don't go in for castration today, how often are marriages and families still laid on the altar of success, and sacrificed today?

And this guy had got to the top. Luke tells us he was 'in charge of all [the queen's] treasure.' So he's the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he's the Secretary of State for the Treasury, he's the CFO of a whole nation. He's at the peak of his career. He's trusted, he's respected, he's made it.

So, what on earth is he doing in the back of a cart, on a desert road, somewhere outside of Gaza, hundreds of miles from home? Well, Luke tells us, v27-28 again: 'He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning.'

Now just think about that. Why would an African, who has reached the top of his career, who has achieved what he wanted, at great sacrifice, make a round trip of a thousand or more miles, in the back of a cart, with all the dangers and risks that would involve, to go to *Jerusalem* to worship, when he has all his tribal religions back home? I mean, this man has wealth, he has status, he has prestige, he has success, he has people's trust –everything we might dream of; he has attained all he sacrificed for, and he has all his native religions back home. And yet he's gone to Jerusalem. Why?

Because, he must be looking for something more, mustn't he? He must be looking for something deeper. Because none of these others things, all the trappings of success, have filled this worrying feeling of emptiness on the inside. Because they can't, can they? Because success and money and prestige promise you so much, and you sacrifice for them, but when you get them, it's as if they turn to dust in your hands.

And so something about the grandeur and the dignity of the Jewish religion has attracted him. 'Maybe this will do it, maybe this will fill this void in my heart'. But what will have happened when he arrived in Jerusalem and finally made it to the temple? He wouldn't have been allowed in. The furthest he could have got was the court of the gentiles, but even then he's a eunuch, and eunuchs were not allowed to enter.

You see, there were all these rules of who could and who could not come in, all designed to show people, look God is holy, and we are sinful and broken, and we can't just approach him any old how. And so, this man has travelled all this way, only to be turned away, empty and excluded.

And that is almost certainly why he's sat in the back of this cart reading from the prophet Isaiah. Because he's reading from Isaiah chapter 53. And because of the

question he later asks Philip, 'who is the prophet talking about' it's a pretty safe bet that he's been reading the whole section that that chapter falls in. Because if you know Isaiah, you'll know that from about chapter 40 onwards the prophet talks about this figure called the Servant of the Lord.

But when you get to chapter 56 you read something remarkable: 'Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.'

And so this man is reading that promise of hope for foreigners and for eunuchs, all in the context of this shadowy figure of the Servant of the Lord, who will make it all possible; who will enable him, not to be excluded and sent away, but to be included and made a full member of God's people, and to be given an inheritance and a posterity better than children and grandchildren; who will in some way answer this man's inner longing, and fill his emptiness.

So he's sat there thinking, who is this Servant of the Lord? Who is this one in the passage he's reading from Isaiah 53, who will be led like a sheep to the slaughter, who will be humiliated, who will have justice denied him, and whose life is taken away? Who is this one who it seems no one can speak of *his* generation and *his* offspring?

And just as he's thinking all that, Philip turns up.

Crossing the Divide

Now it would be difficult to imagine two men more different than Philip and this Ethiopian eunuch. They are divided by race and class and religion, and even by sexuality. The eunuch's a black African, from a country that Philip, a greek-speaking Caucasian, would have viewed as being on the edge of the world. The eunuch's a highly educated, highly successful government official, Philip seems to have been just an average, middle class (if that) kind of guy; the eunuch is a gentile, while Philip is a Jew; and finally, the eunuch is a eunuch, sexually different from Philip, whose Jewish background would have made this guy a rank outsider, right on the fringe.

And so it's going to require something of an earthquake to get these two men together, isn't it? So, did you notice who makes all the running in getting Philip to cross that divide and share the gospel with this Ethiopian? Time and again it's God who's directing this whole encounter. You see, given our natural human tendency to stick with people who are like us, it would have been very possible for the church to have stayed as a kind of close-knit community back in Jerusalem. But first through persecution, and now through direct intervention, the Lord is pushing the good news outwards. It's as if we all need to be pushed out of our comfort zones by the Spirit, if the gospel is to spread beyond our little group. And the striking thing is that it's God who wants to see these barriers of culture and race and class brought down and that divide crossed, so that people different from you and me can hear about Jesus.

Now, we don't know where Philip's journey began, but Luke tells us in v26 that, 'An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." And then he helpfully adds, 'This is a desert place.' Now why does Luke say that? Well, imagine that you were Philip. You're buzzing after all that's just happened in Samaria, all these people becoming Christians, and then you get this vision, or this inner prompting, 'take the road to Gaza', and you walk it and before long, you realize that this road is heading into the desert and it's going nowhere other than Egypt and Africa, and its hot and you're thinking, 'God why have you brought me here? I'm a people person God, and there's not a soul around, and look what's just happened in Samaria, why have you brought me here?' Now, I don't know if you've every experienced something like that, and you feel like God has led you to nowhere, into a desert, and it's getting uncomfortable, but just maybe, as with Philip, God knows what he's doing.

And because of Philip's obedience, and willingness to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, this remarkable meeting takes place, v27: 'And he arose and went. And there was an Ethiopian.' Now our bibles don't really translate it, but what Luke says is something like, Philip went, and lo and behold, would you believe it, an Ethiopian. Because when we trust God, and obey his promptings these kinds of co-incidences happen.

But then the Spirit is there again, v29: 'And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." So again it's God telling Philip, 'come on, you go. You cross the divide'. And Philip goes, v30, 'so Philip ran to him' and you get this funny picture of poor Philip having to run along this desert road, in the heat of the day, trying to keep up with the guy in the cart. I mean, Jesus never promised it would be easy being his disciple did he!

But as he's running to stay alongside, Philip discovers something that many of us have probably experienced in our own lives, and that is that God has been at work long before we arrive on the scene. And God uses previous contacts, or our failures, or our feelings of emptiness, or the nagging questions of life, to prepare the ground for the seed of the good news.

And as he's jogging along, Philip hears the Ethiopian reading from Isaiah. Now, I reckon there's a lesson here for us, because all Philip does next is to begin where this guy is at. He doesn't force anything, he doesn't try to get to last base before he's got to first, he just starts where this man is: v30, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'

When I was a medical student I vividly remember being taught a lesson by my clinical supervisor. He took us (there was a group of 6 of us students) to a patient, a young man, on the hospital ward and he got each of us to listen to the man's chest with our stethoscopes, and in particular to the sound of this man's heart. And he told us that after having listened he would ask us to describe the man's heart murmur – which if you don't know is the sound the blood can make as it goes through a bad heart valve or a hole in the heart, it's a *whooshing* noise. So, we're all standing around the bed in our white coats, and one by one we had to put our stethoscopes on the man's chest and listen. But when it came to my

turn all I could hear was *lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub*, the normal heart sounds. I couldn't hear any *lub-whoosh-dub* of a murmur. And I'm stood there thinking, I can't hear it, what am I going to say?

Well, clearly my colleagues were having the same problem. Because one by one he asked us to describe that whooshing sound. What part of the cardiac cycle was it? Er, systolic. Was it short or long? Short, definitely short. Did you hear a click with it? Er, yes, or no, no there was a click, definitely a click. And then he just looked at us, and said, 'guys, this man has an entirely normal heart. There is no murmur. So please, learn an important lesson, if you don't know something in medicine, ask. Admit your lack of knowledge and ask someone.

And this Ethiopian eunuch has a choice, doesn't he? Does he pretend he understands what Isaiah is talking about, as my friends and I pretended around that hospital bed, or does he admit, 'you know what, I really don't understand'? Does he raise himself up to full government minister height and pretend, or does he humble himself? Because the truth is that we can only really hope to grow and to learn if we are willing to learn, and acknowledge when we don't know. And that goes as much for the things of faith and of God, as for any area.

But this Ethiopian had the humility and the sense to realize he needed help. So he says to Philip, v31, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" and he invites Philip up into his chariot.

The One Who Makes it Possible

So, now there is this remarkable scene, of these two very different men, sat next to each other in the back of a chariot. One of them knows he is seeking, and doesn't have the answers, and the other who has been led by God to come alongside him, and be his guide and show him the way.

And Luke tells us that he's been reading from the 53rd Chapter of Isaiah, where the Servant of the Lord suffers; where he is despised and rejected by men; where he bears our grief and sorrows; where he is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; where the Lord lays on him the iniquity of us all; where he was humiliated and justice was denied him and he was cut off from the land of the living. And the Ethiopian asks Philip, v34, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

And so Philip tells him that it was certainly about someone else. Someone far greater, someone far more magnificent. Verse 35, 'and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.' About the Son of God, who was greater and more glorious than any prophet or any government official, who dwelt in glory unimaginable even for a royal court, but who humbled himself and gave up everything, and was born as a man in poverty. And how, at the cross, he took upon himself all those things that exclude us from the presence of God. All the brokenness, all the sin, all the transgression, all those things that mean our way and this eunuch's way to God is barred, he took it all upon himself at the cross. And it was there that this King of glory, who had become a servant, bore the wrath of God for it all. And he was smitten by God, and he was afflicted, in the words of Isaiah, and he did it all so that we might be brought near, so that we might be made whole.

And now, no Jew like Philip, no foreigner, no eunuch, no-one like us, need stand far off, or be sent away, but through repentance and faith in Jesus, can be washed clean and made whole and draw near to God.

And that's why Christ is the One who makes it all possible.

Firstly, he's the one who makes it possible that our emptiness, our inner longing for meaning and significance can be filled with a deep and lasting joy. You see when the promises of success and career and money and prestige ultimately let you down, it's knowing that Christ sees you and loves you and dies for you to bring you to himself, that can fill your heart with a sense of joy and meaning and fulfillment, that these other things know nothing of. And so this Ethiopian stops his chariot, asks to be baptized, and goes on his way rejoicing. He's been filled.

Secondly, Jesus is the one who makes it possible for you to be included. In perhaps the most painful way, the way of social exclusion, this man discovered at Jerusalem that he could not enter into God's house. He was doomed to exist on the edge. But in Jesus he discovered that God's promise through Isaiah, that even foreigners and eunuchs would be included, had been fulfilled. And you and I can look at our lives, and see, even feel, multiple reasons why God should reject us. That in some ways we're all like eunuchs, in that we all deserve to be excluded. But Jesus has dealt with every single one of those reasons, and so none of us need ever feel second rate citizens in his kingdom. We can all enter in.

Thirdly, Jesus is the One who makes it possible for you and me to cross the divide and reach out across the barriers of colour or culture. You see, the good news of Jesus, whilst it fills our hearts with joy because of God's love for us, is also profoundly humbling, as we realize the price the Son of God had to pay to save us. And that means that in the shadow of the cross, there is no place for racial pride. When you realize that the cross tells you just how bad and needy you are, as well as how loved you are, there is no place for racial or national superiority or thinking you are better than others. Which is why Philip could sit next to this man so different from him. And so can we.

But fourthly, and finally, Jesus is the One who makes it possible for us to tell the good news to others. When we understand what God has done for us in and through Jesus' life and death and resurrection, then we understand that it really is good news. And what do you do with good news? You just can't help telling others can you? You're sort of itching to tell people.

So as we get the gospel, let's swallow our pride and refuse our fear, and like Philip, let's be responsive to the promptings of the Spirit, and meet people where they are at, and ask and answer their questions, and tell them the good news of Jesus.

And having done it, like Philip as he gets whisked away to go and tell the good news up the coast of Judea, let's keep on doing it, again and again.