

Hespeler, 2 May 2021 © Scott McAndless

Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 22:25-31, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

Philip and the Ethiopian had been having a wonderful time as they traveled along in the chariot. They had been discussing the ancient scriptures of the people of Israel. They were foreign writings to the North African man, to be sure, but they were scriptures that he had come to love and to treasure over the years as he discovered that they clearly pointed to deep truths about God and the world. So he found them fascinating and loved nothing more than to be able to discuss what they might mean.

Philip, a Jew, obviously had a somewhat different relationship with these same scriptures. He had known how important they were to his identity his whole life. But just recently, these words had begun to explode with meaning for him. From his new friends, a collection of followers of a man named Jesus, he had learned to find new depths of meaning in the scriptures. For these followers of Jesus believed that he was God's anointed one, the messiah, and they believed that the scriptures had foretold just about everything that was to happen when the Messiah came.

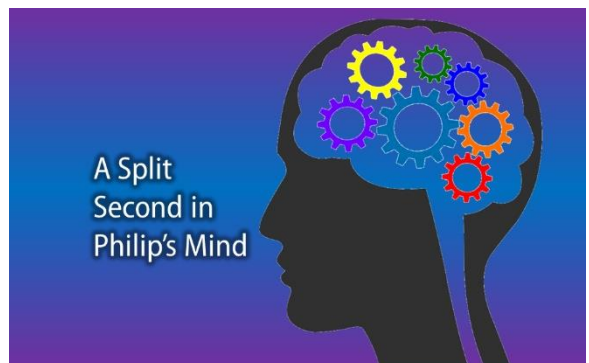
And so Philip was learning to plumb the depths of these ancient writings in order to discover who Jesus really had been, what he had done and why he had done it. He loved doing this kind of thing and, over the past few hours which had flown by so fast, it had been wonderful to discuss this new passion that he had with a new friend.

But, of course, it had all been a very theoretical discussion. Concepts like the love of God, of redemption, renewal and even baptism had been discussed as ideas – wonderful and moving ideas. But you know what it's like when you get into an intellectual discussion. Practical applications often don't enter into it.

The Question that Changes Everything

But then, all of a sudden, that all changed. As the chariot plodded down the road, the Ethiopian looked up and saw that a nearby wadi was filled with water. This kind of thing happened sometimes in the spring when sudden cloudbursts could flood the waters at a frightening pace. But however that water got there, it had the effect of suddenly transforming what had been, up until that point, a purely theoretical discussion into something else. **“Look, here is water!”** said the Ethiopian, **“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”**

To Philip's credit, according to the Book of Acts there was no pause between that question and what came next. This might give us the impression that the leap between the theoretical discussion that they'd been having and the practical act of dipping that Ethiopian into the water happened in a split second within Philip's mind. And maybe it did, but I'm going to tell you something, in that split second, Philip's mind had a great many of things to work through because the answer to that question really was anything but obvious. So let us take a little trip through



the mind of poor Philip during that split second. Here are some very serious issues that he had to work through.

#1 Your Race

“‘What is to prevent you from being baptized?’ Well, let’s start right here: you happen to be an Ethiopian, a black man from the north of Africa. And, no, I have absolutely no issues with the colour of your skin and know well of the nobility of your people, it is just that your people do not belong to the people that I’ve always been told have this special relationship with God.

“And, yes, you can come and you can worship at our temple (not as one of the people, of course, but as an outsider in the court of the Gentiles) and you can enjoy discussing our scriptures with me, but I have always understood that there is no way you can truly belong to the community of God. That is for Jews like me. So, first of all, there’s every reason to think that your Ethiopianness is preventing you from being baptized! It is definitely one of the things that makes me think that these ideas and concepts we’ve been talking about don’t really apply to you!

“But, if I’m going to be truly honest here, that may not be the biggest thing that is preventing you right now. I mean, that racial thing has always been a little bit of a gray zone. There are many stories in our tradition of people from other races and nations who became a part of the people of God. What Rahab of Jericho and Ruth of Moab? What of the whole tribe of the Gibeonites who joined in with the people in the days of Joshua?

“So there is some reason to believe that such a thing is possible, that foreigners can be integrated into the people of God without threatening our essential nature. And perhaps it is even more possible after what Jesus has done, but honestly that is a question that we have barely even begun to explore. So maybe I could let that one slide. But surely there’s another impediment that matters much more.

#2 Your Lack of Gender

“‘What is to prevent you from being baptized?’ All right, you have kind of forced me, but I’m going to allow my thoughts to go there. You are a eunuch, that’s what is to prevent you! And, again, I personally have absolutely nothing against the particular arrangement of your body, but this is not about what I feel. I mean, we’ve been talking all afternoon about the scriptures of my people and they couldn’t be clearer on this particular point. It is right there in Deuteronomy 23:1 **“No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.”** And I’m sorry that my private thoughts are so explicit, but that is actually what it says in the scriptures.

“But it is not just about a specific chapter and verse,” Philip thought to himself. “In fact, come to think of it, that whole chapter and verse system hasn’t even actually been invented yet. So it’s not about one particular law but about what that law means and why it was put there. It has to do with why you, my new friend, were even made a eunuch in the first place.

The People of God

“You see, being a part of the people of God has never just been about individuals. It has always required that we be a part of a larger group. It is about what tribe we belonged to, about our clan

and, above all about our family. That is because being a part of a family brings with it certain obligations: the obligation to obey the male head of the family, the obligation to advance the interests of the family and, of course, to produce heirs to keep that family alive over the centuries. Belonging to that system is what gives us meaning and purpose within the larger people of God. So it hasn't always been!

Why Queens Need Eunuchs

“But you, you have none of that. In fact, the only reason why your queen, Candace, can actually trust you with all of her money is because you have been cut off from all of those obligations. And, I'm sorry old chum, but I mean that very literally. If you were not a eunuch, everyone would understand that you would be required to use whatever resources that passed through your hands to enrich your own family. You would basically be required to embezzle and everyone would think less of you if you didn't. But because you have no part in any family, Candace knows that she can trust you to look out only for her interests.

“But that very thing that makes you so useful to the queen means that you can have no place to belong in the people of God. For if we let in people who, for any reason, do not conform to these norms that order our society, it kind of breaks the whole system. I don't know if you realize how very fragile this whole thing is. Every person has to fit into the system somewhere as a wife or husband, a daughter or a son, a father or mother. All of these relationships are foundational. And the categories of gender, sexuality and dominance have to be completely inflexible. We just can't allow any person in who doesn't fit into that system. And, as much as I like you, my friend, you simply don't fit.”

One More Split Second

These were all of the thoughts that passed through the mind of Philip in that split second. They had to have done so because they reflected attitudes and ways of thinking that had been drilled into him his entire life. They were ideas that were foundational to how he saw his world. And as that split second passed, Philip began to open his mouth to say that he was sorry, but there was far too much that was there to prevent an Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized.

But in the time between Philip opening his mouth and that negative reply coming out, there still remained yet another split second. And, as we've seen, there is a whole lot that can pass through one's mind in a split second.

Jesus Makes us Question Assumptions

“Okay, but wait a minute,” Philip said to his thoughts, “sure, that is how I have been taught to look at the world, but ever since I've heard the story about Jesus and what he did and said, I've been finding that a lot of my assumptions about how things work have been falling by the wayside. And, come to think of it, whenever Jesus had the opportunity to speak up for those lines of authority and keeping everybody in their proper place, he had this annoying way of saying almost the very opposite of what you expected.

“Didn't he teach his followers and say, **'Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.'** (Matthew 23:9) Well, that didn't really sound like what someone who

was committed to maintaining family structures would say, did it? And, what's more the rumour goes that one time, when his family was trying to pull him away from his followers and when he really should have submitted himself to the authority of his family, he said no. He actually looked at his disciples instead and said, **'Here are my mother and my brothers!'** Mark 3:34

How Jesus Welcomed All

"But, more than that, didn't Jesus have a way of welcoming anyone who came his way? Indeed, he often seemed to prefer to spend time with the sinners, the outcasts, the prostitutes and even the tax collectors rather than the so-called respectable people, even though he got into a lot of trouble for it. It just seemed that that whole system that said that people needed to fit into the system like pieces in a puzzle in order to belong was silly and irrelevant in his eyes. He wasn't about maintaining that order so much as he was about overturning that whole order and replacing it with something else, this thing that he called the kingdom of God.

"So you know what, my dear friend, I don't need a scripture that says that you can belong despite your missing parts. And I don't even need to go back and consult with the apostles about this because I can be sure that, if they haven't figured this out yet, they will soon enough. Everything that I have learned about Jesus teaches me that he believes that you are much more important than any law, rule or structure. What is to prevent you from being baptised? Absolutely nothing, my dear sibling in Christ!"

And, one mere second of thought after the original question, Philip said exactly that and he and that Ethiopian went down into the water of that wadi immediately.

How Jesus Changes Everything

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is somewhat surprising. In some ways, it seems to come too early in the story of the Acts. The church, at this point, has not yet even addressed the question of whether or how the Gentiles – people who are not Jewish – can have a place in the Christian community. That will prove to be difficult enough to work through. The question of whether somebody who doesn't fit in the ordinary categories of gender, family and sexuality, you would think, should be unthinkable at this point in the story. But here we have Philip just going ahead and baptising a eunuch, and it seems clear enough from the way that the story is told that he hardly even needs to think about it for a second.

What does this tell us about how much what the early church had experienced of the risen Jesus really made them all question what they had always taken for granted about the world? And that makes me wonder, how much do we allow what we have experienced of the risen Jesus do that for us. The work of understanding the impact of the event of the resurrection is still ongoing and we, like Philip, should give a split second or two of thought to how that ought to make us react to the people we meet who might not fit into the neat categories by which we have organized the world in our minds.