

# New Kilpatrick

Sermon

7th May 2014

Acts 8:26-39

***Spirit... speak to us through your imagination... as we hear stories of the kingdom... and dare us to dream your bigger vision... as we speak of the hopes we have and longings that shape us... Come Spirit... and inspire each of us today... Amen***

Sometimes you just don't know where to look... I mean with all the stories happening this week...

We had council elections this Thursday... which I actually forgot about until Thursday... as there was so much going on... It was as if... we were headlining with the General Election and Brexit negotiations... meanwhile... the council elections were happening...

So you quickly got your head round that... Meanwhile... we were hearing all the cadences of the French presidential election... So we tuned into that...

Meanwhile... stories were... yet again... coming over from the US about their medicare votes... There have been a lot of 'meanwhile' stories this week...

But the biggest of all was Thursday... It was May the Fourth... and so it was Star Wars day... May the force be with you... which... as a series of films... kept you going with action in one part of the galaxy... meanwhile... on a lost planet Luke Skywalker was learning to become a Jedi... So you tuned into that... Meanwhile Darth Vader was in the middle of the construction of the planet destroying Death Star...

Don't worry if none of that makes sense... It doesn't!... Star Wars is made up of a whole series of 'meanwhile' stories... each of which... on the face of it... a minor... secondary story... but would turn out to be significant to the whole outcome and meaning of the film...

And when Philip and the Ethiopian... who are not in Star Wars but the bible lest anyone gets confused... met at that pool of water... that too was a meanwhile story... for the main action was in Jerusalem... yet what happened by the pool... would turn out to be hugely significant to the whole outcome and meaning of the Gospel...

This “meanwhile, down the road”... story is not just adding a bit of colour... but is changing the essence and tradition of the Gospel...

And it happens as they pass a pool of water... where... without hesitation or debate... and through something so utterly common as water... a kingdom doorway is opened to an outsider... which had become one the church has seen necessary to debate ever since...

Baptising the Ethiopian..... Do you ever wonder if Philip questioned what he was doing in that meanwhile moment... or realised the consequences of what was about to happen... and the ways this moment... was going to be interpreted... in centuries to come...

Standing there with him... was someone who had asked a simple question... “Look there is some water... is there any reason why I can’t be baptised?”...

And Philip... well who knows what he is thinking... but very quickly decides there is no reason for this Ethiopian not to be baptised...

But meanwhile somewhere in the corridors of a church council... you can hear the juggernaut brakes suddenly screech... swerving round that pool of water... “Wait just a minute!... You realise what you are about to do here?... You realise what you have here?”...

And I want Philip to have seen all of that in his mind... and still choose to go ahead with the baptism... because we have in this Ethiopian... a personification of so many of the Church’s questions...

Firstly an Ethiopian... The gospel hasn’t really travelled very far up to this point... Jesus has been crucified... and now there is a story of him rising... the Jews are up in arms... and the people of The Way... the early church... is having a difficult time in the homeland of Jerusalem...

The Ethiopian has a scroll of Isaiah... a thing most precious and very valuable... and in this moment of being baptised... he is the first person... to be given care of the gospel... in a foreign land...

Think about it... Us westerners... have to notice... the gospel is going south... and not west... It is going south to Ethiopia... and still the Ethiopian Coptic church cares for that gospel... and were the first to do so... long before Europe was civilised...

And the huge irony is that Europe... when she did receive the gospel... in time used that gospel to justify slavery... of the very first to receive the gospel... which still continues today... through trade and tax rules across the world... where the west has tipped the balance of these things...

Which is what we recognise and continue to rebalance this month through Christian Aid... we do a lot this month to raise funds... but justice and truth too... letting the gospel now instead be used to justify our support of global development... opportunity for women... education for children... rethinking how we live together more justly...

But there is more... This Ethiopian... is the treasurer of the palace of the Queen... He is a political mover... he's part of the establishment and in today's world... he'd be the one everyone votes against... which wasn't so different back then either... because he was part of the class that had Jesus crucified...

The Christian movement has as its founder... a crucified man who dies the death of the criminal... It was officialdom and the Roman Empire that killed Jesus... It was officials and politicians like Pilate and Herod... who had the final say over Christ's life... For this reason and others... political powers and Christians were not on good terms from the very beginnings of the Christian church...

So as they are fighting that out in Jerusalem... and remember Stephen's martyrdom last week... and the whole beginning of Paul's persecution... for the early church was in fear of its existence from those who had the power... Meanwhile the very Gospel of love is being moved out into the world... by one representing those who tried to stop it earlier... and the same will in time be repeated with Paul...

And yet there is more... because the most marked description of the Ethiopian is that he was a Eunuch... He existed in that uncertain... transient place... between male and female... He was ambiguous... but perhaps most important... this meanwhile story... in the

early church... signalled the moment when the Christian Church chose to move away from the rules that excluded such folk from the centre of faith...

There are several points in Old Testament law... where it is stated that Eunuchs are banned from entering the temple... because of their sexuality... which at so many levels speaks into the constant debate in the church over sexuality... yet here is the story... the story of the gospel's first spread into the world... where it is a Eunuch baptised... over and against what the Old Testament clearly states... and who is given the Gospel to carry into the wider world... In this meanwhile story the new Christianity breaks away from its traditional rules...

So when the Ethiopian asked if there was anything that might prevent Philip from baptising him... the answer is... how many reason do you want?... They were in the middle of nowhere... the eunuch was not welcome in the temple... he was from another country... indeed another race... he was from the political classes... he obviously didn't understand the scriptures... and... he was a eunuch... whose whole being was wrapped up in a sense of misunderstanding and ambiguity... existing in a place that was far from 'normal'...

But none of these reasons gave Philip any pause... Surely there is little doubt that Luke records this question of the Ethiopian... because it is loaded... What is to prevent anyone from being baptised?... Can wealth, race, sexual status, piety, understanding and so on and so forth?... The good news is all are invited to share in the fullness of life with God and each other...

This was only a secondary meanwhile story... but through it... the gospel suddenly and completely... became universal... yet meanwhile there is part of the church that has fought against that ever since... but this story is a liberating and saving power... for all the marginalised peoples of our communities and world... and rekindles the dignity and worth... importance and place... of every person...

The many national stories that try to gain our attention may continue to be shaped by ever narrower definitions... meanwhile... here the Gospel is open... and nothing can prevent it from being so...