

## Sermon preached by Louis Bezuidenhout in Inveraray 13 September 2009

### Reading: Acts 8:26-40

(26) An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get ready and go south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This road is not used nowadays.) (27) So Philip got ready and went. Now an Ethiopian eunuch, who was an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia, was on his way home. He had been to Jerusalem to worship God and was going back home in his carriage. As he rode along, he was reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. (28) (SEE 8:27) (29) The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to that carriage and stay close to it." (30) Philip ran over and heard him reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. He asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (31) The official replied, "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?" And he invited Philip to climb up and sit in the carriage with him. (32) The passage of scripture which he was reading was this: "He was like a sheep that is taken to be slaughtered, like a lamb that makes no sound when its wool is cut off. He did not say a word. (33) He was humiliated, and justice was denied him. No one will be able to tell about his descendants, because his life on earth has come to an end." (34) The official asked Philip, "Tell me, of whom is the prophet saying this? Of himself or of someone else?" (35) Then Philip began to speak; starting from this passage of scripture, he told him the Good News about Jesus. (36) As they traveled down the road, they came to a place where there was some water, and the official said, "Here is some water. What is to keep me from being baptized?" (37) (38) The official ordered the carriage to stop, and both Philip and the official went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. (39) When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away. The official did not see him again, but continued on his way, full of joy. (40) Philip found himself in Azotus; he went on to Caesarea, and on the way he preached the Good News in every town.

### Address

The search

... but he continued on his way, full of joy (Acts 8:39)

This story begins with a man who was travelling from Jerusalem to his home in Africa. He was an important man in Africa with great responsibility, yet he was looking for a bigger purpose. He was attracted to the religion of the Jews. This trip was a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He expected to find God there. The religious festival in Jerusalem, the traditions and the sacred writings are very interesting, but it lacked vitality. He must admit - he felt like an outsider in Jerusalem. In his own country he was respected. Being an eunuch, that is a castrated man, was

not something to be scorned in his country. It was the custom to castrate men who had important positions in the palace. But in the religion of the Jews it was different. In Deuteronomy 3:1 he reads:

No one who has been emasculated may enter the assembly of the Lord.

He does not qualify. To him this ancient religion is barren - just like him. It was like the landscape through which he was travelling - it is dry and lifeless. This journey did not seem to be interesting - it is a long and tiring journey through the desert. You do not expect to find anything exciting in the desert. To the traveller the barren landscape might have been an image of his life.

Now he is reading the book of Isaiah on his chariot - it is a way of killing time. But this book has a strange allure. He has learnt from the Jews that a person can get consolation from this book. And indeed, it does have a message for him. In chapter 56:3-5 he reads:

3 "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." 4 For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- 5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

Is it possible that the God of the Jews is more accommodating than the people themselves? Perhaps this God has a purpose for this man. In these chapters he also finds interesting songs about the Servant of the Lord. There are four songs, in chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52-53. It is an image of a person who is rejected by the community, but through whom the grace of God is revealed to the world. How can the grace of God be revealed in a person like this?

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

The eunuch can relate to this person as far as the rejection is concerned, but he does not experience the grace of God in his life, and definitely does not expect to discover it on this desert road. The desert is a godforsaken world. He is wrestling with so many questions...

The coincidence

Then a stranger called Philip came to this traveller. This encounter was strange to both of them. Philip had a very successful ministry in Samaria where he attracted big crowds. Why would God send him to meet this individual from Africa on this desert road?

To the eunuch it was an extraordinary coincidence that a man who knew the Word of God should approach him just as he was trying to understand a difficult text. Little did he know that this was the grace of God at work. This is an example of how we encounter the grace of God in the most unexpected ways.

Other people in Jerusalem tried to avoid making contact with this man, but Philip boards his wagon and sits right next to him. He takes the question of the official as the starting point for the discussion.

This is the way the grace of God is transmitted - it is passed on from person to person. The fact that Philip sits next to the official on the wagon is not without significance. When God uses us as an instrument of his grace, we cannot pass it on to people over a distance. We have to be close to them. We have to begin by addressing the questions that they have.

This principle has important implications: Parents, teachers, youth leaders, grannies, granddads, if you want to understand the youngsters, you have to get on board and sit next to them. You have to travel with them. You have even to listen to their music, to play football with them, to watch television with them. Their questions, their feelings, their thoughts, their worries should be the important starting point in your communication with them. Young ones, we are glad that you are sharing this service with us. We shall try to get on board your chariots. Please understand - it is sometimes a bit difficult for us to board - you are travelling very fast.

God uses Philip to open the Word for the traveller. The Word of God contains treasures that are not always appreciated by the world. It is not necessary to decorate the Word and to use gimmicks to make the word interesting to the world - it is beautiful and full of surprises - it just has to be unveiled. It speaks to all kinds of people under all circumstances. The Word is like precious wood. It is not necessary to paint it in order to make it look good - you can just polish it so that the natural beauty can be revealed.

As the two of them are studying the fourth Servant Song in the book of Isaiah, they read that the author expressed his surprise at the way the grace of God is working:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (53:1)

This servant, who was led like a lamb to the slaughter, who was silent in his suffering, who was rejected by people, became the vehicle of the grace of God. His life was as barren as the desert, yet,

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. (53:2).

Through the grace of God, there is new life where it is not expected. The arm of God is revealed even in barren places. It is like a root out of dry ground. This servant changes the lives of those around him. They realise that there is a bigger purpose in life. They admitted: 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Who is this servant of whom this prophet wrote almost six centuries BC? The text is not specific. This image may refer to the Jews who were in exile. They can be seen as the Suffering Servant of God. There are individuals who can also be related to this image, people like Moses, Jeremia and perhaps also the prophet who is writing these words! This is a pattern that we find in the kingdom of God. The grace of God works in this way. This pattern can be applied to more than one person.

To the early Christians this image was most applicable to the life of Jesus. Jesus was rejected by the community. He was too common for them to be a leader. He was like a lamb that was led to the slaughter. His life was tragic. Yet, his gospel is like a root out of dry ground, he exposed the world to the grace of God in the most amazing way. People who have gone astray like sheep, have found a shepherd and a new purpose in life. He got on board the chariot of the leper, the blind, the sinner - through his suffering he boarded the chariot of all who are suffering. He sat next to us. He revealed the Word to us. He brought new joy into our lives.

The transformation

He continued his journey full of joy. Philip left the Ethiopian, but he was not alone. He realised that Jesus got on board his wagon. The Ethiopian experienced the grace of God. He became an instrument of the grace of God, his joy is proof of his new calling. Could this be the way Christianity spread to Ethiopia?

Philip has spent a short time with us during this service, next to us on our chariot. He has revealed God's grace to us. Jesus has boarded our wagon. May the joy of his message will stay with us for the rest of our lives. May we, like the Ethiopian, continue the rest of the journey rejoicing.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.