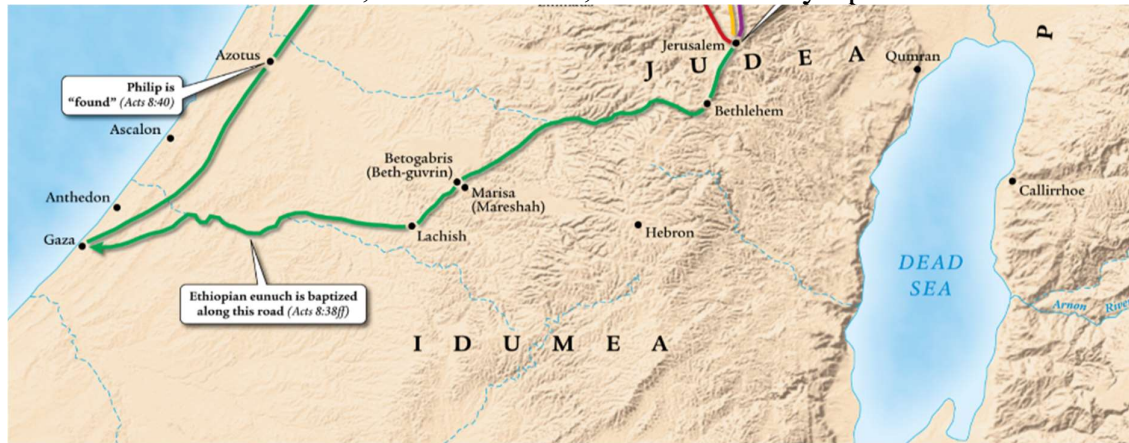


## SERMON – 2 MAY 2021 – ACTS 8.26-end, John 15.1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Philip is one of the apostles, and he gets a visit from an angel. I love the fact that it doesn't seem to faze him at all! "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza" – and the geographer in me likes the line "This is the wilderness road". If you want a map, log onto the zoom service or watch it on youtube later.



An Ethiopian eunuch – so most definitely not one of the chosen people of God, wrong nationality, wrong colour, and not a real man.

I love the idea of a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians – and if you go to the British Museum (when we can) you can explore the early history of Christianity in Egypt and Ethiopia. To quote their website "By the fourth century AD, Christianity was flourishing in both Egypt and Ethiopia. Christian Egyptians became known as the Copts (from the Greek name for Egyptians) and the church maintained strong links with its Ethiopian counterparts. Since antiquity, Ethiopia had been a major trade route, linking Egypt and the Mediterranean with India and the Far East." It is so sad that for us, Ethiopia, East Africa, is simply a place of war, violence and starvation – not a place of heritage and a history to be proud of.



The stained glass window in Africa Hall by Afewerk Tekle

This Eunuch was obviously an educated man, sat in his chariot, reading the book of Isaiah. How sad that in our culture we don't expect people to sit and read the bible, but across this world the bible is read, studied, discussed – as it always has been.

You can imagine this wealthy, exotic, powerful person – reading the word of God and wondering what it was all about. He had been to Jerusalem to worship, so he had some experience of God. I wonder if he had felt welcomed in Jerusalem – whether his wealth and status had made him welcome, or whether his foreignness and difference had marked him out. I should imagine he was a man who was never really included – and perhaps he wondered if God would include and welcome him.

God does include and welcome him, and the Spirit says to Philip “Go over to the chariot and join it”. You can imagine Philip running up beside the chariot, the Ethiopian reading Isaiah out loud, and wondering why this strange man was running along beside him. “Do you understand what you are reading?” “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And something tells him to let this man into his chariot – I wondered if there was anyone, any sort of security for this important man, anyone who tried to stop him.



He is reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, the part of Isaiah where he prophecies about the Suffering Servant – the passage that Christians have related to Jesus, the Messiah. Here we are, just a few months after the crucifixion, and Christians are making that connection – the prophet Isaiah describes the Messiah as the one who will suffer, who will die.

I commented last week how difficult I thought it must be to hang on to your faith if you live in India, in the middle of Covid at its worst, if you are surrounded by suffering. But actually, the whole idea of the suffering servant is that God knows what we are going through, he understands – and I have, over the years, found a strength in that.



So often God is the one in charge. God the omnipotent, all powerful, creator, King. The Ethiopian knew about omnipotent, powerful, rulers – perhaps he wanted a God like that, or perhaps he knew that he needed a God who was different. A God who – yes, is omnipotent, all powerful, creator, King, Lord, Messiah, all the other words we want to use – but a God who is also the one who suffers, the one who allows himself to suffer, who enters into his suffering world.



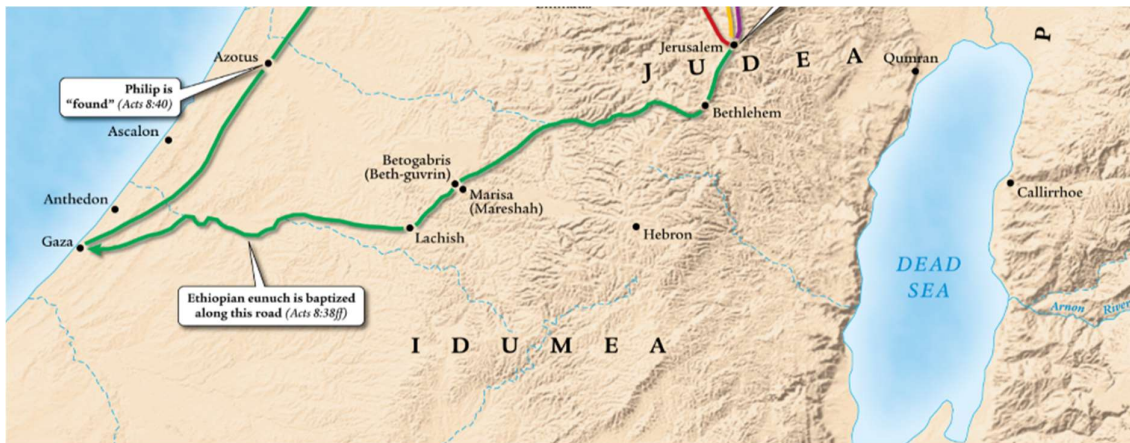
Going back to Philip, wouldn't it be lovely if someone had written down exactly what he said, exactly what he talked to the Ethiopian about. A God of welcome, Jesus the Messiah, the one who had time for the outcasts, and also had time for people like Nicodemus, and for the Greeks who had come to Philip and said "Sir, we would see Jesus."



The-Baptism-of-the-Eunuch Aelbert Cuyp

"Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?", and the answer is "nothing". I will baptise you, baptise you now.

I wonder what the chariot driver, the bodyguards, all the servants that this powerful man must have – I wonder what they thought of it. I wonder how the eunuch felt, as he went through the waters of baptism – and then found that Philip had been snatched away. Perhaps we would have expected Philip to go on with him, go on to preach, to speak, to convert others – but that was not what the Spirit had planned. He found himself in Azotus, and preached the good news all the way to Caesarea.



Back to the map – Azotus is the city now known as Ashdod, Israel’s major port, 20 miles south of Tel Aviv, 30 miles west of Jerusalem. Caesarea is about 30 miles north of it – so he had quite a walk, probably a good thing he seems to be angel-powered. There is good news to be proclaimed – just as there is 2,000 years later.

The Ethiopian, I suspect he continued south, wondering what had happened to him, and feeling amazing. He had faith, he believed in God, he knew he was welcome and accepted. No doubt he told others what had happened, no doubt he met other people whose lives had been changed by Jesus – I wonder if he knelt before Queen Candace and told her about the King of Heaven.



But all of this is not primarily a story of the past. It needs to be a story of the present. We may not be very good at talking about our faith, of telling people what Jesus means to us – but we can talk about how we’re reopening, talk about how we find zoom, talk about the pleasure of music, of worship, of community. We can tell people the church is not dead, that we are here this week collecting for the food bank, that next week we’re supporting Christian Aid, that we are involved in Darley Abbey Day, that we’re open for baptisms, weddings and funerals, etc etc. We can talk about our vision for a better future, a Kingdom where all of God’s children are loved and welcomed. As the Acts reading ended “he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” – may we do the same.