

Encounter with Jesus – Ethiopian Eunuch

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at several people who met Jesus physically during his ministry, through others after his death and in the Old Testament. Last time we looked at Cornelius and the second Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles. Tonight we are looking at an Encounter with Jesus through Phillip the Evangelist. Hilary is going to read us his story.

Acts 8:26-40

Who was the Ethiopian Eunuch?

We don't know his name, but he is described as an "important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians", in other words the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Ethiopia – a very high and powerful position. The fact that he was in a chariot also reflects his status. Most people walked, the more well-to-do rode animals, but only the richest and most important had chariots. Ethiopia was regarded at the time as the very end of the earth, and the most commonly mentioned feature of Ethiopians in Jewish, Greek and Roman writings is their black skin, hence he was probably an African. "Candace" seems to have been a dynastic title of the queen of Ethiopia and is mentioned elsewhere in Greek and Roman literature. Tradition says that the queen mother ruled the kingdom, which was a black Nubian kingdom south of Egypt partly in what is now the Sudan, which had lasted since about 750 B.C. (it is not Abyssinia, which came to be called Ethiopia in more recent times and converted to Christianity in the fourth century A.D.). This kingdom had some trade with Rome, but this official and his entourage must have been among the few Ethiopian visitors this far north.

The passage also tells us "This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship." So he is probably a Gentile "God-fearer" similar to Cornelius. When meant literally (which was not always the case), "eunuch" referred to a castrated man. Although eunuchs were preferred court officials in the East, the Jews opposed the practice, and Jewish law excluded eunuchs from Israel (Deu 23:1). So, if this man was actually a eunuch, he would not have been able to fully convert to Judaism. But God could certainly accept eunuchs, even foreign eunuchs, (Isa 56:3-5) promises them "a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off". An Ethiopian (Cushite) "eunuch" in the Old Testament turned out to be one of Jeremiah's few allies and saved his life (Jer 38:7-13).

How did he encounter Jesus?

This is another encounter initiated by God, who sends an angel to direct Phillip to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Two roads led south from near Jerusalem, one through Hebron into Edom and the other joining the coast road before Gaza heading for Egypt. **[Picture]** This command might have seemed absurd to Philip as an evangelist who had just seen a revival in Samaria, as he might have no one to preach to on a little-travelled road, but God often tests faith through such commands and Phillip obeyed. It would not have been a short or easy journey, from Samaria to the north of Judea to the road at the south east. When he is on the road, probably not sure where to go next, the Holy Spirit speaks to him again specifically to go to the chariot and stay near it. He hears the Ethiopian Eunuch reading from Isa 53:1-12 (the skill of reading silently was not developed at the time; those who could read nearly always read aloud) and as a good evangelist takes an opportunity to start a conversation by asking if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian Eunuch does not understand it and asks Phillip to join him in the chariot and explain the passage.

What happened during the encounter?

The Ethiopian Eunuch's confusion is understandable, since in Isaiah there are a lot of passages referring to "my servant". The earlier ones (Chaps 41, 44, 45, 48) refer to Israel as a nation being God's servant, but then in 49:5 Isaiah distinguishes "his servant" from the rest of Israel because he is going to "bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself" and God will also make him a "light to the Gentiles". In 53:1-3 the servant is rejected by Israel; in 53:4-12 the servant bears the sins of Israel, although he himself is not guilty (Isa 53:9), and he suffers and gives his life voluntarily to bear the sins of many (Isa 53:12). We can see the fulfilment of this by Jesus in hindsight, but it was obviously incomprehensible to the eunuch. Luke tells us that "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" – a very good example of how we need to start where people are and take them on to the truth about Jesus.

Although this is described as the desert road, there are some wadis near Gaza which are dry creek beds that fill with water during the rainy season. Conversion to Judaism required full immersion baptism (hence the ministry of John the Baptist was offensive to the Pharisees as it implied those who went through it were not Jews) and as a God-fearer, the Ethiopian understand this. Phillip must have explained Christian baptism to him, so he requests to be baptised and Phillip agrees. After the baptism Phillip is taken away supernaturally by God and the eunuch does not see him again. He re-appears near Azotus, the ancient Ashdod, twenty-five miles north of Gaza and about thirty-five miles west of Jerusalem. Caesarea was over fifty miles to the north of Azotus, just off the same coastal road, and we met Cornelius there last time.

What effect did the encounter have on the Ethiopian Eunuch?

We are told he "went on his way rejoicing." but nothing else. Interestingly Luke devotes nearly as much space to the conversion of this one foreigner, who could function as an indigenous witness in his own culture, as to the revival in Samaria described in verses 5-25 immediately before this story. Because Samaritans were considered half-breeds, the eunuch is the first fully Gentile convert to Christianity, before Cornelius and his household. Christianity began to expand in Abyssinia in the third century AD, and that empire was declared "Christian" about the same time as the Roman Empire was. Nubia converted later; no certain record of this Ethiopian's witness remains, but we can suppose that he testified of his faith in high places because God had set up this encounter for a reason, even if we haven't been given the details of it.

Discussion – There are two questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

Are we listening to the Holy Spirit and prepared to do what he asks of us as Phillip was, even if it costs us in terms of time, location or reputation?

Are we looking for opportunities to speak to people about Jesus and prepared to start from where they are?