



## A Sermon

In the presence of His Majesty King Charles III and Her Majesty Queen Camilla  
St Thomas' Church, North Sydney  
20 October 2024

One of the great puzzles of history is the existence of the Christian church. Jesus of Nazareth and a small band of followers exercised a ministry in Galilee in Judea in the first century for three years. With the approval of the religious establishment, the Roman Empire crucified him for insurrection, as they crucified thousands of others in Judea and beyond. His followers deserted him in death, apart from a few brave women who kept vigil. The rest locked themselves away for fear of the authorities.

And yet, within days they completely changed. A group of largely uneducated men and women, not wealthy, not influential, not organised, without a manual or plan or instruction, without weapons or financial resources began to preach that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that changed everything. They called on everyone to turn from sin and put their trust in him for life in this world and the next. And according to their enemies, their preaching turned the world upside down.

The first Christians proclaimed what they called the good news of Jesus—and the impact of their words, we may confidently say, changed the course of world history in a way that reverberated around the world and down the centuries, eventually reaching even this place and bringing us together on this day.

They preached the good news of Jesus – that he was declared Lord and Judge of all, by his resurrection from the dead, and that his death on a cross paid a debt we owed but could not pay. Good news for sinners who need forgiveness, and good news for mortals who will face death.

Today we have heard an exquisite story from Luke's eyewitness account of the earliest days and weeks of the Christian church. It portrays the dynamics of gospel progress. This gospel has shaped the world and influenced countless millions of lives from Judea in the first century to Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's well worth knowing what's going on and what's at the heart of it.

Today, a story which tells us about who is in charge of the progress of the gospel, who is at the centre of the gospel, and the outcome of gospel progress.

Let me begin with the end. The story concerns the conversion of an official of the Ethiopian royal court. We're told he is the keeper of the Queen's treasury. He's the CFO of the Kingdom, the Secretary of State for Treasury. But did you notice that at the end of the story we're told he goes on his way, *rejoicing*. By the end of the story he is the keeper of new treasure. Treasure of a most personal and precious kind – and so he goes on his way rejoicing.

Perhaps the idea of a joyful Treasurer takes you somewhat by surprise! But this man is baptised into the name of Jesus and goes home rejoicing. The good news of the gospel moves those who welcome it to joy!

That's where this story finishes but let's go back to the beginning. How is it that an influential, black foreigner on the desert road out of Jerusalem came to rejoice in Jesus?

It was all God's doing. The first thing to know about the dynamic of gospel progress is that God is in charge. We're told in v 26 that *an angel of the Lord* spoke to Philip and *told him* to head south on the road out of Jerusalem into the desert. Now Philip had recently experienced great effectiveness preaching the gospel in the many villages of the Samaritans. But the reason Philip was in Samaria was that following the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, all the believers in Jerusalem, except for the apostles, had been scattered, we learn at the beginning of chapter 8.

Luke tells us (in 8:4) 'those who were scattered went about preaching the word' – and Philip went to Samaria.

This is hugely significant. Jesus had said to his disciples before his departure, 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.' In saying so, Jesus gave expression to the *universality* of his gospel mission – *to everywhere*; and the *necessity* of his gospel mission – *for everyone*.

This was the fulfilment of ancient Israel's vocation to be a light to the Gentiles. And this radically overthrew centuries old barriers and hostilities between Judeans and Samaritans, between the people of the covenant and the gentiles. The good news of Jesus will break down the walls of separation whether ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious.

It cannot be denied that the spread of Christianity across the globe and down the centuries has sometimes involved not the tearing down of walls of separation but the assertion of one culture to the detriment of another. This was true in the country of my heritage Sri Lanka, and it was true in this country. And yet in both places, the good news of Jesus has taken root and given birth to vibrant local Christian communities that saw beyond cultural form and discovered good news of great rejoicing. The gospel undoubtedly inhabits cultural forms but it transcends those forms, it is not defined by any culture and indeed critiques culture and conforms every culture to the likeness of Christ. Here is a story in which God says, do not avoid, diminish or neglect people of other nations. The Spirit told Philip, 'go to that chariot and stay with it.'

Stephen is martyred, the believers are scattered, Philip is no apostle, but an ordinary believer who is sent into the desert – where he meets a lone, foreign dignitary who happens to be reading the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. At every point, God is in charge of his mission.

Second, the centre of the gospel is the good news of Jesus.

Philip obeys the angel of the Lord and unexpectedly he meets a man, about whom we learn a great deal in a few words.

He's described as an Ethiopian. He was probably from Nubia in the territory which we now know as Sudan, then part of the Ethiopian kingdom. Certainly, he was a black African man. He was an official in the court of the Queen of the Ethiopians. He was her treasurer – trusted, senior, capable. But he's a eunuch so he's also marginalised and stigmatised, possibly previously a slave. Now he's travelling in a chariot – a commonwealth car! And we're told, he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

He may have been an Ethiopian Jew, who were descended from those who had fled the Babylonian exile and taken refuge in Egypt in the 6<sup>th</sup> C BC. Centuries later they sided with Cleopatra in her war against Julius Caesar, and when she lost, they migrated again, some to Yemen and some to the Sudan in the decades before the birth of Jesus.

He may have been Jewish, but if so, then as a eunuch he would have been barred from entering the Court of Israel at the Temple in Jerusalem. He may have been a gentile who was a worshipper of Israel's God. Either way, he was probably restricted in his worship, confined to the outermost court of the temple, barred from the presence of God.

But he is wealthy enough to have purchased a scroll of Isaiah which he is reading, according to the custom, aloud. When Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading, he answers with humility – How can I understand unless someone guides me? That's very poignant isn't it? You can have the word of God in your hands and not understand it. And if that is true, God grant us the humility to seek a trustworthy guide. Happily, God himself has provided a guide in Philip, and the official invites him into his chariot.

The verses he was reading just happened to be from Isaiah 53:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him.

The official inquires of Philip, 'of whom does the prophet speak, himself or someone else?' And Luke records for us these glorious words in v35, 'Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.'

No doubt he spoke of what Jesus himself had said, that the scroll of Isaiah was fulfilled in *him* – *he* was pierced for our transgressions, *he* was crushed for our iniquities, upon *him* was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds *we are healed*.

The bible is neither sentimental nor timid. It is entirely familiar with the capacity of the human heart for doing evil and calling it good. It knows this world of sorrow and suffering and tears. But it doesn't hesitate to say that God is not pleased with our routine indifference to one another, our exploitation of one another, our neglect of God, our thanklessness and greed. But God does not turn his back on a world that turns its back on him. The Cross of Christ declares forever that God is committed to redemption, to forgiveness, to justice. And he comes among us in the person of His Son who lays

down his life to bring justice and mercy to an undeserving world. He told him the good news of Jesus. The good news of God's self-substitution; he suffering in his body what was ours, that we might be crowned with what is his. Good news of forgiveness, good news of freedom from guilt and fear and shame, good news of welcome and adoption.

As the hymnwriter put it:  
What thou, my Lord, hast suffered  
Was all for sinners' gain  
Oh mine was the transgression  
But thine the deadly pain...  
What language shall I borrow  
To thank thee, dearest Friend  
For this, thy dying sorrow  
Thy pity without end?

The Ethiopian who had been barred from entering the Temple, now welcomed! How moving to hear him say to Philip – 'here is water, what prevents me from being baptised?' He has heard the good news, he has expressed his faith and repentance toward Jesus in baptism.

The Holy Spirit now takes Philip away, but the official *went on his way rejoicing*. His faith was not in his guide, nor was it dependent on his guide. His faith was in Jesus. The keeper of the Queen's treasury, now the keeper of a treasury of joy – the good news of Jesus!

Four concluding observations

The gospel makes its way through the God directed ministry of ordinary Christians – that is what Philip is – not an apostle, not a prophet, a man filled with the Holy Spirit and mature. That should be a great encouragement to ordinary Christians like us.

The gospel is for everyone – it is as the angel announces to the shepherds at Jesus' birth, 'good news of great joy that shall be for all the people.' In Jerusalem, Judea and all Samaria and to the ends of the earth – to the Sudan and Ethiopia, to England and Sri Lanka and Australia. Race, gender, culture, education, wealth – no barriers – the gospel is for everyone.

The gospel concerns the Son who died for sin and was raised again. The centre, apex and goal of all God's purposes is Jesus Christ who is calling to himself a people, from every tribe and language and people and nation.

And to all who receive the gospel with repentance and faith – joy! Joy in the good news of Jesus! Joy in forgiveness of sin and adoption into God's family. Joy that is not stolen way by trouble or suffering or persecution or death. Joy incomparable, indestructible and eternal. Joy in the good news of Jesus

*Kanishka Raffel*  
*Archbishop of Sydney*  
*20 October 2024*