

Reading: Acts 8:26-40

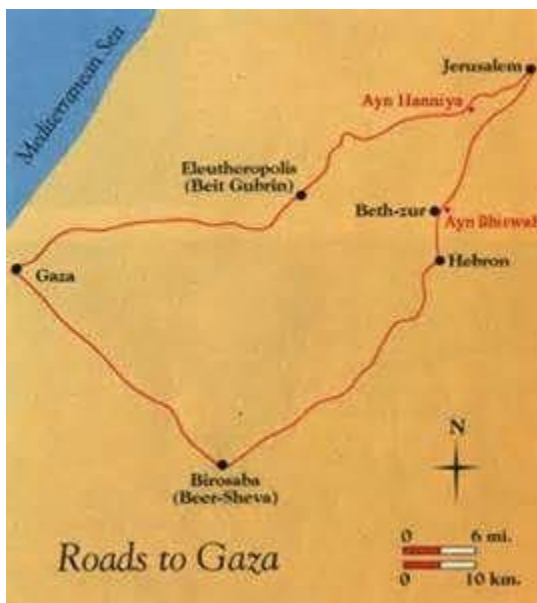
Text: Acts 8:36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Theme: *A better understanding of scriptures is always helpful in living out our faith*

Today, I am doing something that I rarely do, which is not to preach on the gospel reading. There are two main reasons for the change. First, the gospel reading is a continuation of Jesus' farewell speech and we are quite familiar with the themes that it covers. Second, and more importantly, the passage from Acts deal with some key issues in the life of the early church and its members; things like the work of the Holy Spirit, understanding scriptures, membership, and baptism.

Christians, including many, if not all, of us, continue to struggle with these same issues and I thought it would be useful to spend today reflecting the Acts passage, where the issues are being developed nicely through three questions: "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v30); "How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?" (v31); What is to prevent me from being baptised?" (v36).

The passage tells the story of an encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch. The early Church had just buried Stephen and Paul and his group's persecution of the Church had scattered the leaders. Philip escaped to Samaria where he proclaimed the gospel of Christ, baptised people that had accepted his message, and performed miracles.



The Ethiopian, a name used for dark skinned people, had come to Jerusalem to worship God. He was returning home on his chariot, via the 'wilderness' road that led from Jerusalem to Gaza, when the Spirit told Philip to go down to the said road and join the Ethiopian. Philip did, and he found the Ethiopian reading aloud a passage from Isaiah 53, which contains the line, "... he was wounded for our transgressions..." (Isa 53:5).

Philip asked the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v30). And he replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him (v31).

The Ethiopian asked Philip many questions about Isaiah 53. So, Philip began to share with him the good news about Jesus the Son of God, which Isaiah 53 was referring to. As they continued along the road, they came to some water and the Ethiopian said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He stopped the chariot and he and Philip went down into the water

where Philip baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit took Philip away, while the Ethiopian continued on his way, rejoicing.

That is a summary of the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. It seems trivial, but it is loaded with theological implications for all Christians. We do not have time to discuss all the theological issues that this passage has explored, but I would like us to focus on the three questions in the passage, which I have mentioned above.

We start with Philip's question to the Ethiopian: "Do you understand what you are reading?" It is a sincere,

straightforward, and simple question. The Ethiopian's answer is equally simple and, critically, honest. "How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?" It is so refreshing to hear the honesty of both Philip and the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian can read the texts, but he lacked the contexts, which Philip provided. They stay with the texts and are only interested in the message of salvation that Isaiah is talking about, which Jesus has fulfilled. There are no talks about skin colour, ethnicity, the Ethiopian's position, wealth and sexuality; their meeting is all about God and God's salvation plan.

Now, imagine Philip asking the same question to Christians today. What kind of response do you think might Philip be receiving? It is highly unlikely that he would be hearing the honesty of the Ethiopian. Technology has allowed many to share on the many platforms their knowledge of scriptures and theology, and it seems like everyone is an expert. The humility of the Ethiopian allowed him to learn quickly and accepted the Good News of Jesus Christ that he wanted to become a member of the body of Christ, the Church, right away; he wanted to be baptised into the family of the risen Lord. And when he saw water along the road, he asked Philip: "What is to prevent me from being baptised?"

Now, have you noticed Philip's answer? Yep. Total silence; not a word at all. He did not feel the need to say anything, for the Spirit had connected his heart with that of the Ethiopian. He also knew moments like these were the reasons why the Lord was wounded. What else was needed to be said? What was to prevent this Ethiopian from being baptised? For Philips, there was none, hence the silence. There was water on the road, and he had the Ethiopian baptised.

Now, imagine the Ethiopian asking the plethora of current Christian traditions the same question. How might they respond? When I was an undergraduate student, I took the opportunity to experience all the different churches that were available. From that experience, I am very confident that the answers from all the denominations will not be as simple as Philip's silence and action. Baptism remains one of the most debated issues in the church, and I put it down to our lack of humility to be guided in our reading of scriptures. Today's passage gives a clear and simple answer about baptism in the Church, and the baptism of Cornelius and his family, in Acts 10, offers more useful insights on this important sacrament of the Church.

So, here is a sample of the likely answers that the Ethiopian might have received were he to ask today's Christians. In the Uniting Church, there is the issue of the Elders' approval and the time required to file a request. In other denominations, there may be an issue with the holiness of the venue, the amount and kind of water, the day, the need for witnesses, the qualifications of the baptiser, sexuality, and perhaps the need for more lessons and maybe even an exam. Some like to be baptised like Jesus, not realising that it was a John's baptism in which Jesus' was baptised, and some are so arrogant that they would not honour the baptism some people had already had. Somehow, we always manage to erect barriers to exclude people from participating fully in the life of God.

Today's passage says baptism should be simple, but we make things complicated because we do not allow scriptures to tell us about what is needed. So, get guidance when you read the Bible. Biblical texts were written in ancient languages, at a different time, in a different culture and at different places. This makes it difficult to understand the Bible. Even seasoned scholars still seek guidance when they read the Bible. So much harm has been done to people like the Ethiopian in the name of God and scriptures due to our lack of humility to seek guidance as the Ethiopian did.

A better understanding of scriptures is always helpful in living out our faith.

For the glory of God.

Amen.