

Armagh Baptist Church – 7:00pm
Sunday 4th October 2009
The First African to be Baptised
Acts 8:26-40

Introduction

Towards the end of my time in Cavan I had the joy of baptising quite a number of people from the Continent of Africa – Mostly Nigerians: Coker & Nike Adediran, Olufunke Akinlabe - Tolushe and Tolayo Akinlabi too!

Sometimes we think that God had a special place for Europe in his heart, as we look back over so many years of church history – most of it focussed on the Continent of Europe. And from the Continent of Europe many missionaries have gone out with the Gospel to other un-reached parts of the world. To us, it appeared, that most of those countries that we regarded as “mission-fields” were in Africa, Asia or South America. But recently the tide has been turning. Europe has become one of the neediest mission-fields today. It is regarded today as Post-Christian Europe. Europe today is the mission-field, and many missionaries are now coming from Africa, Asia and South America to work here, because of the state of Christianity on this Continent now!

In his book, ‘What’s so great about Christianity’, Dinesh D’Souza says:
‘The vital centres of Christianity today are no longer Geneva, Rome, Paris or London. They are Buenos Aires, Manila, Kinshasa and Addis Ababa. “The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes,” [Philip] Jenkins observes, “and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning. In 1900, more than 80% of Christians lived in Europe and America. Today 60% live in the developing world. More than 2 out of 3 evangelical Christians now live in Asia, Africa and South America... Europe today has 560 million Christians and America has 260 million, but many of these are Christian in name only. In comparison there are 480 million Christians in South America, 313 million in Asia, and 360 million in Africa. The vast majority of these are practicing Christians.’

The Gospel first came to Europe in Acts ch.16, when Paul responded to the Macedonian Call in Troas, and then crossed that narrow neck of water joining the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and landed in Macedonia, planting the first European churches in Philippi and Thessalonica. That was when the first Europeans were converted to Christ. But that was in Acts ch.16. But if you turn back a few pages in your Bibles to Acts ch.8, you will see that the Gospel got to Africa eight chapters *before* it got to Europe. Because the first convert to Christ from the Continent of Africa was the Ethiopian Eunuch. And it was Philip who led him to the Lord, having been told by an angel to leave the revival that was going on in Samaria, and to ‘Go south to the road –

the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ He started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian Eunuch. This was God’s way of getting the Gospel from Jerusalem to Africa. So maybe God had a special place for Africa in his heart too!

God has a plan that one day people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will gather around his throne in heaven, united in Christ, and worshipping the lamb – the Lord Jesus Christ who was slain for each and every one of them (Revelation 7:9-10). You see God is no respecter of persons. God doesn’t see the colour of our skin or the way we look at all. He sees each and every one of us as people that he created from one man Adam (Acts 17:24-27). He sees each of us as people who have fallen into sin, because our ancestor Adam sinned. He sees each one of us as people who need to be saved from our sin. And He knows that there is only one way of salvation for all of us, no matter where we were born or where we come from. Because *“Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12). So it doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter whether you were born in Africa, or Europe or Asia or America, each and every one of us needs to find Christ, to trust in Christ, and be saved from our sins! So I want you to come with me this morning and let’s see how the Gospel got to Africa!

1. What do we know about this man?

An Ethiopian – It doesn’t say he was from Ethiopia, the country on the Eastern tip of Africa, but he was an Ethiopian, of the Ethiopian people group. Most commentators believe he came from a region called Cush in the OT, or Nubia, the Upper Nile region from Aswan to Kartoum. Modern day Southern Egypt and Sudan. I had the privilege of visiting Ethiopia with Ken a few years ago. On our first visit we stayed in and around Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. But on my second visit, a year later, I travelled for 2 days through Western Ethiopia to Bonga Refugee Camp on the Ethiopia-Sudan border, near the Blue Nile region. There I preached at a church conference for the Uduk Tribe, from Sudan, who were now refugees inside the Ethiopian border. They were a lovely people group. Very dark skinned indeed. Some other Sudanese tribes were there – the Nuer and the Dinka – very tall thin, dark-skinned people. All of these people groups would have come from roughly the same area as this man – the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been in existence from earliest Christian times, and it is reckoned that it was this man who took the Gospel to Africa, because Philip witnessed to him one day! So the Gospel was continuing to spread - from the Jews around Jerusalem, then into the surrounding Judean countryside, and then into Samaria as we saw last week. Now it was going further afield into Africa!

An Official – He worked in the service of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. He was her treasurer, the Chancellor of the Exchequer or Minister of Finance - the next best thing to Alistair Darling. So he was a very important high-ranking man. He would have been a man of influence. If he got saved, there's no telling who else could be influenced for Christ in the needy continent of Africa. But God was certainly at work in his life!

A Eunuch – A eunuch was someone who had been castrated. He would have been sterile. As such he was seen as unclean by the Jewish religion, and even though he had gone to Jerusalem, fascinated by the Jewish faith, trying to find out about the Living and True God, because he was a eunuch, it would have been impossible for him to fully convert to Judaism (See Deuteronomy 23:1). He was a God-fearer, he was a gentile, but because he was a eunuch, he couldn't even become a proselyte – (a convert to Judaism) - which a gentile could normally do by being baptised. This route into Judaism was not open to him. Because he was a eunuch, he was shut out!

A searcher – He had gone up to Jerusalem searching for God. 2000 miles! He probably travelled down the River Nile by boat, and then from Egypt took the direct route up the coast through Gaza to Jerusalem in a chariot – or possibly just in a cart drawn by oxen. He had taken his whole entourage with him. A caravan of officials and servants would have accompanied such an important person.

2. What did this man need to know about God?

Well it seems that this man was on his way back from Jerusalem to Africa. He had probably visited Jerusalem during one of the Great Feasts such as the Passover.

But we know from Jesus in the Gospels that the Jewish religion wasn't all it was supposed to be. Remember Jesus had to clear the Temple of the money-changers. It was being run by rogues. Jerusalem and Israel in general had failed to be a light to the nations, pointing men and women to the Living and True God! So this man had come away from Jerusalem dissatisfied, and still searching for the Truth that could save him from his sins.

Perhaps that's a bit like you – maybe you have been searching in this church and that church for reality, maybe you've even investigated other religions to try to find the answers to your questions. Well I hope that this morning you will sense something real in this church, and that you will not go away dissatisfied from here. I hope you will find what you're looking for. Please ask us after the service if you have any questions about anything you have seen or heard here today – but please don't go away dissatisfied!

One thing this man had done while he was in Jerusalem was to purchase part of the Bible. In those days it was written on scrolls by hand. You couldn't go out and buy the whole Bible neatly bound like we have it today, but you could buy part of it in the form of a scroll. And it seems in v.28 that this man had just bought the OT prophecy of Isaiah. Which is just as well, because out of all of the books of the Old Testament, Isaiah is probably the nearest thing to a Gospel Tract! Isaiah was able to see, 700 years before Christ, many of the things that were going to happen to the Messiah whenever he would appear. How he was going to be the Suffering Servant, who would suffer and die for the sins of the people, and through his death and resurrection bring us to God.

Well on the way home this man was reading from his Isaiah Scroll. I wonder had he got fresh hope of one day being included among the people of God as he read his scroll, because in Isaiah 56:3-8 it says that one day Eunuchs would no longer be outcasts, unable to join the people of God. They would be included in God's family as better than sons or daughters! I wonder had he taken fresh hope from those words? The same passage talks about how foreigners, not just Jews, would be included. And "My House will be called a house of prayer for all nations." That's the text we had hanging in the entrance hall in Cavan Baptist Church. One of our members, Betty Abbott, made it for us for our Opening. It was a constant reminder to us, that that's what the Church should be today – 'a house of prayer for all nations' – no-one should be excluded, if they put their trust in Christ. One day in heaven the church will be made up of people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. This must have been not just Good News, but Great news, to this Ethiopian Eunuch!

As Philip, God's messenger, God's evangelist, approached this man's chariot, he heard him puzzling over another passage in Isaiah just a little bit earlier in the scroll. It's what we now know as Isaiah ch.53:7-8. What was it all about?

Philip asked him, 'What are you reading, and do you understand it?' The Ethiopian responded, "How can I, unless someone explains it to me!" What an opportunity! And Philip was ready for it! So, just as Jesus had done before when he had accompanied some travellers along the road to Emmaus, Philip began at that very passage and used the Scriptures to point this man to Christ! (Lk 24:25-27, 44-47.)

So what did this man need to know?

- 1. That he wasn't beyond hope.** That he could be included among the people of God. It was still possible for him to be saved and get right with God.
- 2. That God's Word, the Bible holds the answers,** if only we will look. We might need someone to explain it to us, but don't let that put you off. Come to our mid-week Bible Study, or our Friday morning discipleship group, or just ask some of us to explain to you the way of salvation from the Bible.

It's God's Book of Answers.

3. He needed to know that the key to all the Scriptures is Jesus.

He needed to be pointed to Him. And so do you, if you've never trusted in Jesus before.

4. But you know I don't think Philip stopped there. I think Philip told this man what he had told the Samaritans (Acts 8:12), and what Peter had told the Jews (Acts 2:38-41), that he had to **trust in Jesus** to be his Saviour, but he had to **repent of his sin**, and **be baptised** as well.

How do I know this? Well no sooner had the Ethiopian seen a pool of water, than he said, *"Look here is water, why shouldn't I baptised?"* (v.36). And why shouldn't he? The Jews wouldn't have allowed him to be baptised to join their religion, but the Good News is that true Christianity excludes no-one, as long as they have trusted in Christ and repented of their sins. So there was nothing to stop him being baptised!

Now someone seemingly has added v.37 into our Bibles:

'Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.'

The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'

That verse is not there in the original manuscripts that lie behind our Bibles. There's nothing in it that is contrary to the rest of the NT, but it seems that a later scribe is careful to point out that we must believe with all our hearts that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that Jesus is the only Saviour for sinners, otherwise we shouldn't be baptised. And of course he was right, but that didn't give him the right to add to Scripture at this point. We know from the rest of Acts that this is so anyway. The order is clear elsewhere: Repent and be baptised. Believe and be baptised.

So why shouldn't you be baptised?

What's stopping you?

What's hindering you from believing?

What's hindering you from being baptised?

That's what this man needed to know.

3. What did this man have to do?

He simply had to...

Repent of his sin.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as His Saviour.

Be baptised as a believer.

Then he went on his way rejoicing. And started a church in Ethiopia! He began to tell the vast Continent of Africa the good news of Jesus Christ, and now today practically all of Africa has heard the Gospel!

What do you have to do today?

Repent of your sins?

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour?

Be baptised as a believer?

Rejoice in your salvation just like this man did, and become part of a Bible believing church in your area? If you live in Armagh, why not join here? Start telling other people the good news about Jesus so they can be saved too!

Conclusion

That's what we know about this man.

That's what this man needed to know about God.

That's what this man needed to do.

But what about you?

It doesn't matter who you are, or where you come from, the way of salvation is the same for each one of us.

Each one of us can be saved, by turning from our sin, by trusting in Jesus and his death for us on the cross, and then obeying our Lord by being baptised as a believer, as a public confession of our faith.

So answer the question - What is it that you need to do today?

(v.39) After Philip had baptised this Ethiopian, and they came out of the water, the Spirit immediately whisked Philip away and the Ethiopian never saw him again as far as we know. All the more amazing that the church the Ethiopian started when he got back home is still going today. God kept him going.

(v.40) Philip appeared about 20 miles away in a place called Azotus, and he simply carried on preaching the Gospel wherever he went in all the towns and villages until he reached Caesarea.

It is there that we meet Philip again in Acts 21:8 – probably 20 years later. He's still living in Caesarea, his home is still open for hospitality for God's servants, he is still an evangelist, and in fact he has four unmarried daughters, who were still involved in the Lord's work – they were all prophesying still!

Philip may have been one of the first deacons, just like Stephen.

His role may have been initially to wait on tables for the widows in the daily distribution of food, but his gifts and abilities went far beyond that.

He was probably unaware of it, but God had just used him to bring the Gospel to the whole continent of Africa! Because he shared with one person that day!