

Acts 8: 26-40 & John 15: 1-8

When I think about the readings set for a Sunday and how to preach from them, I am often struck how much we are people of our time. The things that are happening in the world around us have a great affect on how we read the Scriptures, how we receive the way the stories are told, and what we hear them saying to us.

So when I came to the lesson from Acts this morning the thing that struck me most was the fact that the Ethiopian eunuch must have been black. And in an era when we are becoming more aware how people of colour are saying they are tired of being invisible in many contexts, it made me wonder how many people of colour appear in the New Testament?

Well, for one we have the official, the Eunuch, an Ethiopian who was employed in the service of the Queen of Ethiopia. He creates quite an impression. He had his own chariot and that marked him as a man of some status; he was literate, and therefore educated, for he was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah – presumably in a Greek translation, though we can't be sure; and he must have been wealthy, because he could afford to obtain *his own copy* of such a scroll - and such things did not come cheap.

And did you notice how Philip acted towards him? He didn't ignore him, but neither did he patronize him. He ran up to the man in his chariot – perhaps it was being driven slowly to enable him to read the more easily – and he waited to be invited to join the Eunuch and then he explained the Scriptures to him only after being asked to do so.

There is a long history of Ethiopian Judaism, although 'Ethiopia' was a general geographical description in New Testament times. It is likely the Queen of Sheba was from that same region, and possibly the Jewish community in NE Africa dates back to that ambiguous visit in the Old Testament when Solomon gave her more than she had believed possible. And we have few indications of how warm was the relationship between Palestinian Jews and their black cousins.

There is another person who appears in the Acts of the Apostles, one 'Simeon called Niger' – perhaps to differentiate him from Simon Peter – and his surname suggests he too could have come from northern Africa, but we know nothing more about him except that he was gifted in speech in some way, perhaps preaching, as he was numbered among the 'prophets' at Antioch.

But there's another person, almost certainly black, who appears in the Gospels: Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene was part of Northern Africa, modern Libya. This man, you will recall, was compelled by Roman soldiers to carry Christ's cross after he stumbled under the weight of it as Jesus made his forced journey to Calvary. Matthew, Mark and Luke record the Cyrenian's role but Mark alone adds that this Simon was **the father of Alexander and Rufus**. So Simon of Cyrene, and his sons, were known as Christians in the churches for whom Mark was writing – very likely the Church in Rome.

But the Church in New Testament times had its greatest following among the poor, and this is likely to have been true in the case of Simon of Cyrene. Unlike the Ethiopian Eunuch there were no signs of status about him – nothing to make the Roman soldiers think twice before ordering him to do their bidding as if their slave. And I cannot help but think that the colour of his skin would have played a part in that, too. He would have stood out in the crowds.

Racism isn't confined to Western culture, and neither is it a modern phenomenon. The New Testament churches were all too aware how insidious attitudes based upon racial difference and social distinctions could be. James in his general Epistle rails against those who showed **partiality**. Among the congregations that he was addressing the biggest discriminatory issue was wealth, and the social status that comes with it. And it probably was more than just hoping the richer members would give generously and thus support the much poorer members; by showing **favouritism** to the rich the church leadership may have hoped to influence attitudes amongst the rich and powerful in the wider community; such people were often hostile to Christians and could make life very difficult for them. So cutting out this **favouritism** could have been costly for James' churches, but it was vital if they were to be true to the Gospel.

Saint Paul also spoke out against the kind of attitudes which we still battle with today, as he addressed the Churches in Galatia. There he was countering an assumed superiority adopted by Christians who had Jewish roots, and so great was this movement within the churches that even Christians of Gentile origin were trying to be Jewish, with Christian Gentile men getting themselves circumcised, for instance.

Paul was furious. This is not why Christ died, he says. Not to put everyone under the obligations of a law and its rituals which Christ had come to fulfil, and by fulfilling, to abolish. Don't make yourselves slaves again to all that, he says! And then he launches into a far wider attack on the main forms of discrimination in the Churches, where, as today, so many people felt they had reason to count themselves superior or singularly blessed in some way in which others were not:

for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

[Gal. 3: 27-29]

To adopt the imagery used by Jesus in today's Gospel, Paul is saying "you are *all* part of the Vine, and that is what matters. That alone is the source of your blessing and your identity"

The vine was a recognised symbol of the people of Israel: they saw themselves as the vineyard of God's choice, the nation that received his particular attention and kindness. In calling himself "the Vine" Jesus is deliberately taking over the imagery and declaring that *he* is the true Israel, God's chosen.

To believe in Jesus, he says, is to belong to him and be made part of that Vine: and a vine bears fruit, in abundance. Part of that fruit is seen when we overcome in our hearts and minds the social barriers and prejudices that we inherit from our culture; but the greater challenge is to make the world, and the Church, better places which reflect the various shades of inclusivity which Paul so memorably celebrated.

My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. Amen.