

**The Ethiopian Eunuch**

In Mark 1.17 Jesus says to his first disciples: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." It was his way of telling them that they were going to share the good news of Jesus Christ so that men, women and children would come to Jesus to have the forgiveness of sin, to have eternal life. You will go fishing to bring men, women and children into the Kingdom of God.

And in the book of Acts we see the fulfillment of this prophecy on the part of Jesus. We see Peter and John who are now fishers of men. They preach and thousands of people believe in Jesus and enter the Kingdom of God. And so far, the fishermen have been seen fishing or preaching in front of large crowds. 3000 people are converted on the day of Pentecost. An entire city in Samaria is turned upside down by the preaching of the gospel in chapter 8. So far we see mass conversions, mass evangelism, mass fishing.

But there, at the end of chapter 8, there is a change. Philip, who is used to speaking in front of a crowd of people, is sent to speak with one man in the middle of nowhere. It changes from mass fishing to rod fishing. For the first time in the book of Acts we see the conversion of an individual. We see in close-up an individual life transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Luke gives us a glimpse of the man's thoughts, his heart. We hear him talking. We see exactly what is going on in his life. It was impressive to see the conversion of 3000 people, entire cities. But in these verses, Luke presents us with a personal case study, one life transformed by Jesus Christ. And this passage has a lot to teach us and I suggest that we spend two Sundays studying it. Next time we will look at the role played by Philip in this story, how he hears and obeys the call of God, how he makes himself available, how he announces the good news of Jesus Christ to an individual. But for this morning we will be looking at the Ethiopian eunuch. And in him we see an example of how salvation in Jesus Christ comes to this man and can come to any person.

**His thirst**

V27 tells us a lot about this man. He is a senior official to the Queen of Ethiopia, the superintendent of all her treasures. He is Brun le Maire of his country. You can imagine that he is a rich man, a man with a certain level of power and authority. He occupies a prestigious position. But despite all this, he is a man who feels a void in his life, in his heart. His work, his money, his political power cannot fill the void. These things fail to satisfy a thirst in him. And we see in verse 27 that it is a spiritual thirst, a thirst for God. Look at the end of the verse: "He came to Jerusalem to worship". He takes weeks off to make a very dangerous trip of two to three thousand kilometers to worship God. Luke does not tell us if the man is already a convert to Judaism. Maybe he's just heard of the God of Israel before and he wants to see for himself who that God is. The text does not tell us so it is not worth guessing. In any case, he comes to Jerusalem to worship. There is this desire deep within to seek the divine, to seek and worship God. He is ready to take the trouble to know God, to worship him. In a world of idols, gods and philosophies, he comes to Jerusalem to seek the one true God.

However, at the time of this story, he has already left Jerusalem and is returning home. But he's still thirsty. Despite all the religious activity, all the activity of the temple, this man remains unsatisfied. He's still looking. And we know that he is searching because in verse 28 we see him "sitting in his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah." Perhaps while he was in Jerusalem he bought himself a scroll, a manuscript of this great Old Testament prophet. If so, he would have spent a lot of money to procure it. But the price of the manuscript does not matter to him, such is his determination to find God, nothing will prevent him in his quest. His thirst.

And when we look at the Ethiopian in this story, we see a model of the human condition. We are looking for answers to the biggest questions in life. The Greek philosopher, Plato describes the human being as "a being in search of true meaning". We have been taught from a young age that the only things that matter in the world are the things you can taste, touch, hear, smell and see. But the Ethiopian knows that is not true. He knows God is there and he wants to know him. He wants to worship him. There is a thirst in him that even wealth and political power cannot satisfy. And if you read the biographies of the great and famous of this world, you will see people who seem to have the whole world but who are hungry, who feel an enormous thirst.

Take two examples from the sports world: Mary Pierce, the French tennis star who won two Grand Slam titles, she said: "Despite all the success, I felt that something was missing in my life, I felt a void." Jonny Wilkinson, one of the greatest rugby players in the history of the sport, after winning the Rugby World Cup in 2003 he said: "As I walked around the stadium after the match, I felt that the exultation was already disappearing. I had just made my biggest dream come true, but deep down there was a huge void". English writer Jack Higgins, author of over 60 bestsellers, says, "I made it to the top, and I found there was nothing there." Freddy Mercury, the lead singer of the band "Queen" said: "I am worshiped all over the world, I am a millionaire but I feel empty." Britney Spears earned \$58 million in 2012 but asked the question, "If there's nothing missing in my life, then why do these tears come at night?"

You can taste fame and the fortune but you are hungry for more. You can get to the top of your career but you are unsatisfied. There is an expression in English that describes the mad "dog eat dog" life. We call this life "The rat Race" The American actress Lily Tomlin said of this life: "In the rat race, even if you win, you are still a rat!" And the Ethiopian knows he is not a rat. He knows he exists for something bigger than his career or than money. He knows that he is created in the image of God, to know God.

There is a thirst in his heart because God put this thirst in his heart. Hear what King Solomon wrote over 2,500 years ago: "(God) has even put into man's heart the thought of eternity, even though man cannot comprehend the work that God completes from start to finish."

We know that this world is not everything. We know we are not just rats. We cry out, "What is the meaning of my life. Why am I here I just talked about Freddy Mercury and his band "Queen". In one of their songs they ask the question: "Does anyone know what we're living for?" The Ethiopian has gone to Jerusalem to ask the same question and he returns home without finding the answer.

And let's be honest with this passage this morning. The Ethiopian and came to seek God in the religion of the time, at the center of worship. And it's not even sure that he made it into the temple. According to the law of Moses, a eunuch was not allowed to enter the temple to worship. "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord."

Deuteronomy 23.1. Imagine his frustration if that was the case. Even in a place of worship, he cannot find answers to his questions. He returns home, frustrated, disappointed, still hungry.

**His confusion**

18 months ago we had a heat pump installed at home to replace an old oil-fired boiler. And last week, after I don't know how many interventions on site or by phone, a technician finally managed to fix a programming error that bothered us for many months. I think he was the sixth person to try to do so. The first five technicians all told me that I had programmed the device incorrectly because I did not understand the user manual! They all said to me, "This is it, it's fixed" but it was not fixed. It was so frustrating reading the manual,

trying to find answers, believing that you had found the solution to the problem and then finding nothing had changed. What confusion and frustration. I wanted to understand. I thought I understood but I didn't understand anything and neither did the technicians. And in this passage, there is a man who wants to understand, who goes up to Jerusalem no doubt believing that he would find answers there that he could understand but who returns home, confused, still with questions. And we know that he is confused thanks to his answer to Philip in verse 31. Philip hears him reading the text of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53, and he asks him in verse 30: "Do you understand what you are reading?" And like me with the Heat Pump manual, the eunuch responds in verse 31: "How can I if someone does not guide me?". He has questions. He is looking in the right place but he does not understand what he is reading. He reads the passage quoted in verses 32 and 33 and wants to know who was led like a sheep to the slaughter? Who didn't open his mouth? Who was humiliated? Who suffered an injustice? Whose life was taken from the earth? He wants to know who Isaiah is talking about! Look at his question in verse 34: "Please, of whom did the prophet say this? Of himself, or from someone else?" He reads the text trying to understand but he doesn't understand.

And if he read these verses, he also read the verses just before, the verses that we read earlier: "But he was wounded because of our transgressions, broken because of our faults: the punishment that gives us peace fell on him, and it is by his wounds that we are healed. We were all like lost sheep: Each went his own way, and the Lord has laid down the sins of all of us upon him." These verses which speak to us so clearly about Jesus, his sacrifice for us, the Ethiopian does not understand. He reads about the suffering of Jesus. He reads of someone who bore the faults of others, of someone who was broken. He reads of a peace, of a healing that comes through the suffering of another and, of course, he wants to know who it is. He is so close. Jesus is in front of his eyes, but he does not see him.

And in verse 35 we see the source of all his confusion, the source of his thirst. He needed someone to explain the person of Jesus Christ to him. "Then Philip opened his mouth and, beginning with this text, told him the good news of Jesus." He explains to him that the lamb that was killed was Jesus. Jesus was humiliated. Jesus suffered a terrible injustice, the life of Jesus was cut off from the earth. Jesus did not open his mouth to defend himself or to take revenge. And Philip would undoubtedly have explained the meaning of these things. Verse 35 says he preached the good news of Jesus. And what is the good news? The good news is that by his death and by his resurrection, Jesus, the slain Lamb, he bore our faults, he bore our sin, he was punished in our place, he suffered the wrath of God against our transgressions. This is what the prophet Isaiah says: "But he was wounded because of our transgressions, broken because of our faults: the punishment which gives us peace fell on him, and it is by his wounds that we are healed. We were all like lost sheep: each one went his own way, and the Lord has laid all our sins on him." This is the good news of Jesus. Our sin, our disobedience, our faults, they put a barrier against us and God. They prevent us from approaching God. Because of these things, our relationship with God is broken. This is what explains our thirst. This is the source of our thirst, of our frustration in life: We are far away, separated from God by our sin. We are under his judgment. But Philip announces to the eunuch that the judgment of God against his sin, against his disobedience, against his faults, this judgment fell on Jesus. Thanks to Jesus, the debt is paid, the sentence is served, there are no more barriers, the way to God is open. No need to go to the temple to offer sacrifices anymore. No need to shed the blood of animals at the altar anymore because the blood of Jesus has been shed and all your sin is covered, blotted out by the blood of Jesus.

And for the first time in his life, the eunuch understands the person and work of Jesus Christ. For the first time he hears "the good news" that he, a sinful man, can enjoy a relationship of peace and love with God, no longer under God's judgment, no longer an enemy of God but a child of God, loved by God, forgiven, welcomed in the presence of God.

It is possible that I am wrong but I would say that there are thousands of our fellow citizens who are going through the same confusion as the Ethiopian. They are looking for answers in a church. They come to worship. They observe the religious rites. They participate but they leave disappointed, confused, because no one explains to them the good news of Jesus Christ. Yes, they know he died on the cross but they don't know why. They think they have to do good works to atone for their sin, to pay off the debt for their sin, but they don't understand that Jesus has already done everything. They don't understand what Jesus did for them, to settle their sin, to give them eternal life. They don't understand God's love for them. They are so close. This glorious truth is before their eyes, but they do not see it. I often speak with people who have spent years in the pews and never, ever understood the good news of Jesus. They never understood what the apostle Paul wrote in a letter to his young friend Timothy: "This saying is sure and worthy of being accepted without reservation: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the first of them." I don't know of a better summary of the good news than this. "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the first of them." His thirst, his confusion.

### **His joy**

In verse 8 we read of the impact of the good news in the city of Samaria when people turn from their sin, they believe the good news and they put their trust in Jesus: "There was great joy in this city".

And in verse 39, after his declaration of faith in Jesus in verse 37: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God", after his baptism in verse 38, this public declaration of what Jesus had done for him, Philip leaves the eunuch and we read at the end of the verse: "Filled with joy, he continued on his way". We don't hear about him in the Bible anymore. He goes home and, in a sense, his life goes on as before. But in another real sense, nothing is as before. His encounter with Jesus changes everything. He now knows that he is loved by God. He knows his sin is forgiven him. He knows that in Jesus he has eternal life, that he is no longer excluded from the presence of God, that his relationship with God is restored, that relationship for which he was created. He understands the glory and the beauty of Jesus Christ, his person, his work. And all these things filled him with great joy. He continues on his way. He returns to his life in Ethiopia but does so with a new joy, a new purpose, to live for Jesus, to live to serve Jesus, to live to love and to serve the creator of the universe. Here is his new identity. Here is the new great reality of his life. He is born again. He has new life in Christ. He is a new creature. He has a new heart. His life is no longer a vacuum. He knows a joy, a peace that had previously escaped him.

The African philosopher Augustine wrote this about God: "You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." When the Ethiopian came to Jerusalem, he had no joy, no peace. His heart was restless because he did not have Jesus. He was confused and lost. Yet he returns home with joy in his heart, in his soul. He comes to Jerusalem alone, he goes home with Jesus.

In this passage this morning, God asks you questions: "Are you thirsty? Do you have this spiritual thirst? You know that you are not just a rat, that you are on earth for something greater, to know God, to live in relationship with him. If you are thirsty, if you are confused, the answer is Jesus, the good news of Jesus. It is my prayer that all of us leave this place today, not with thirst, not in confusion, but in the joy of knowing Jesus.