

Back in the '60s, a beatnik boy attended the morning service at a respectable middle-class church. After the service, the groovy kid grabbed the minister's hand and said *Man, I really dug that rap you laid on me!* The staid minister was confused and replied *Young man, I don't understand.* The beatnik answered; *Daddy O, I really went for your word; it came right down the middle, loud and cool and I was like, gone man!*

The minister was slightly offended and he confronted the young man saying; *Sonny, I don't understand what you are saying; so please use appropriate English!* This bearded long haired young man tried again: *Dad what I mean is, I really connected with what you said, so I put a ton in your collection plate.* Suddenly the cast of enlightenment crossed the face of the minister and he said; *Crazy man, crazy!* This story is really about identity. The minister presented his identity which was professional and dignified befitting a member of the religious establishment. The beatnik wore another identity which declared that he was an independent individual.

Identity is important and it's the only reason I sometimes wear a dog-collar, so visitors to our church can identify me as the minister. It's also the reason I don't wear robes, because I believe in the Priesthood of all Believers where all God's people are gifted and have their own role to play in the church. We are all equal in the eyes of God and so why should I dress as if I am something special? You're right, I shouldn't and I don't!

Identity is important. Once there was an Ethiopian eunuch and he was a prestigious minister of the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He went on a journey to Jerusalem, perhaps on business for Candace or perhaps to find his identity. Eunuch's were slaves and I'd expect that an identity crisis could occur when a eunuch rises to become one of the most powerful men in Ethiopia, which was a powerful empire in Biblical times. Historians have observed that the first century was a time when many were tired of false god's and loose morals. Many were searching for a faith that offered hope and made sense.

The magi came from the east looking for a new hope to which a suspicious star pointed. Some people were seeking more than the strict legalistic values of Judaism offered, and in Jesus, there was a new hope and identity. Christians are those who have a strong sense of identity centred in Christ, and are called to offer this life changing identity to others.

When we think of those apostles who brought Christ to others in the first century, we think of Peter who took the gospel to the Jews and Paul who evangelised to the gentiles. Then there was Philip who encountered an angel who told him: *Get up and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.* Philip obeyed and on the road to Gaza, he ran into the eunuch who was reading the scriptures while riding in his chariot. The Eunuch invited Philip to join him so he could interpret a difficult passage from Isaiah. The Eunuch asked Philip; *Who's this sheep that was led to the slaughter? Is Isaiah referring to himself or someone else?* Philip explained that Isaiah was announcing the coming of Christ, who died on the cross and was led like a sheep to the slaughter. He rose from the dead and announced salvation to all who would believe. *Stop the horses!* commanded the eunuch. *I believe and I want to be baptized right now!*

Some Christians believe that baptism is something they agree to when they become believers. Other Christians believe that baptism is a sacrament and it gives and strengthens faith. I believe baptism is a sign of one's faith, that baptism gives the Christian a faith identity, or in the case of an infant, the faith that is to come. The eunuch went back to Ethiopia, cleaned by baptism and in union with Christ, ready to start a new life. It's possible that the Ethiopian Orthodox church of today is a living witness to the eunuch's powerful witness. ***But the point is this: The Ethiopian eunuch found identity in Christ and shared the hope of a meaningful new identity with others.***

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch reveals what true evangelism is about and how it's carried out. And from this story, it seems that evangelism which is the sharing of the Good News of Jesus, is at its best when it crosses cultures and identities. And it serves as a lesson to me and perhaps others.

The lesson is that while I may be comfortable sharing the gospel message with people who are like me; people who look like me, who think and act like me, Jesus' command was that we take the Gospel to all nations, not just people like ourselves. And Jesus said He would be with to the end of time. The famous Christian nurse Florence Nightingale said that all of Christianity could be expressed in eight one syllable words, four of which are spoken by God and four spoken by us: ***God says: See, it is I. And our response is Here I am, Lord.***

First: ***See, it is I.*** The artist Holman Hunt painted a famous picture of Jesus knocking at the door of our heart. I've often wondered why it isn't the other way around? It's not we who are knocking down God's door which seems the way it should be, but it's God who's there, knocking at our door and asking to come in. When you think about this, it's a radical notion and it appears in our text for this morning. In the story of Philip and the Eunuch, God is already present and He's already picked the time and place for this remarkable meeting.

Remember that it was an angel of the Lord who directed Philip's steps to that wilderness road. And it was the Holy Spirit who pointed out the Ethiopian's chariot and told Philip to join it. Philip's agenda was not calculated or composed. It was spontaneous and Spirit-directed. It's the height of arrogance to think that we take God anywhere. God is already active in our world and in our lives, long before any evangelist gets there.

Our work as evangelists is to find out what God is already doing in people's lives, and to help them understand that what's going on around them. God is already speaking the words: *See, it is I.* That's why Philip's first comment to the Ethiopian eunuch makes no judgment, but only asks for insight into the man's own perceptions: Philip asks if the Eunuch understands what he is reading? Philip didn't present himself as one with all the answers and he didn't presume he knew the wants, desires or needs of the stranger in the chariot. For all Philip knew at this point, the Spirit could have brought him to the Ethiopian so that the stranger could teach him!

What makes Philip a true evangelist is that he waits for the Spirit of God to make the first move, and that Philip is better at listening than talking, which is another lesson I can learn from!

The Ethiopian is the one to be evangelized to, yet he is the first to offer any sort of invitation in this story. His long quest for spiritual fulfilment was what had brought him to Jerusalem to worship. And his quest for spiritual fulfilment had led him to obtain and study the Hebrew Scriptures. He was seeking information, insight and inspiration. He was as the Holy Spirit already knew, the perfect candidate to respond to Philip's question *do you understand?* The Ethiopian's mind is hungry and his heart is ready. He knows he needs someone to guide him. What he didn't know is that God was already guiding him.

It's the Ethiopian who extends his hand first and who invites Philip to join him in his chariot, and then initiates the direction of their meeting. Can there be any doubt that God had already been working and waiting in the Ethiopian's life to bring him to this point? Philip could have cleverly turned to any Scripture that fitted his agenda to tell the good news of Jesus? But the Holy Spirit brought Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian's attention that day.

As an evangelist Philip is required to do but two things: go where he is directed and respond to those who respond to him, and then help them respond in faith to God's invitation. A lecturer in evangelism said: ***If you have ten minutes to share the gospel with someone, spend the first nine asking questions and listening. Only then can we speak words on target.*** When we speak more than we listen, it's like flying a kite in the dark. Our words go out but we've no idea if they ever get off the ground.

It's God's work to prepare the heart. It's God's work to name the time and it's God's work to let the Spirit blow where it may, just as it did with the Ethiopian Eunuch.

It's our work to ignore our cultural prejudices and be ready to help all people hear God speaking in their lives as He says: *See, it is I*. And it is our work to help bring people to a place where they're able to answer God in replying: *Here I am, Lord*. **Amen**

(1618 words)