

'Do you understand what you are reading?': sacred ambiguity and unclobbering scripture

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 28 April 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter 5 B

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

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip's question in Acts of the Apostles chapter 8 is such a great one, and it echoes down the centuries. Do we understand what we are reading when we read scripture? Whether we are conservative or varying degrees of liberal, it is easy to think we do. But do we really?

This question is one reason that we have a sermon, or homily, or, as this community likes to call it, a reflection, in worship. For, as the eunuch responds, how can we understand unless we have a guide? The alternative is just using scripture as a looking glass, reflecting only our own faces, hopes, fears, and presuppositions.

Note well, a guide to scripture is not a simple giver of answers, and certainly not determinative for all times and places. For we continue to reflect on scripture, again and again, precisely because God's living Word, capital 'W', is revealed in scripture but is not fixed within its small 'w' words. Rather, as the great biblical interpreters have always said, God's living Word emerges out of scripture in the encounter of human beings with the text, as guided by one another, our contexts and our deep Tradition, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate guide and inspirator.

This is crucial to recall, lest we are tempted to believe that scripture is too easily understood: whether over-exalted into an idol or a supposed instruction manual, as conservatives are sometimes drawn to do; or reduced to a mere item of intellectual curiosity or piece of cultural heritage, as progressives are inclined to do.

Either way, that loses the real subversive power of faith which scripture can hold for us, particularly in stories such as of the Ethiopian eunuch: which, in my view, is one of the most subversive of all in scripture, not least in its queering dimensions...

'Do you understand what you are reading?' Queer people are among those frequently scolded by others who do seem to believe they understand the scriptures only too well. Often, it is actually a very, very, tiny number of scripture verses that are mentioned, and without much, if any, attempt at reflection about context, depth, or breadth, of understanding.

It is also usually assumed that queer people do not know, or are in denial about, scripture - when actually queer people have usually wrestled with scripture, and read far more widely and deeply, than those who claim to understand it so straightforwardly. In response, particularly to the so-called 'clobber' texts, I therefore sometimes encourage people to make a list of what I call 'comfort', 'confidence', and 'courage' texts. The thing is, if you start doing that, you quickly run out of time and paper, or into creating a very large document!

The nonsense of using scripture to clobber others also becomes even clearer when we consider the great biblical stories like that of the eunuch today. For do we really understand what we are reading here? If we do, it is surely only through the Holy Spirit, speaking through extraordinary sacred ambiguity. Let us then explore some key features, helped by recent queer biblical scholarship, not least that of Sean Burke¹, building on the best Christian scholars down the centuries. As we do so, whether we look at the Ethiopian eunuch in terms, such as religion, class, race, gender or sexuality, we find that simple meaning in scripture slips away and we are drawn far beyond into the sacred ambiguity and mystery of God.

Indeed, some queer scholars have even compared Luke's writing here to a drag story, because of the way it dramatically subverts all kinds of normative ideas of identity. In that sense, Jesus Christ might also be seen, through queer eyes, spiritually speaking, as a great divine drag queen?

At the very least, as Cottrel B. Carson put it, the eunuch's multifaceted character 'defies categorisation.'² In doing so, blurring so very many social role boundaries, Luke invites us into the boundary-transgressing potentiality of a new type of community in Christ. Central to this is also how we regard human bodies, not least the significance and use of male genitalia, as traditionally understood. How far have we really come, you may well ask, regarding that?!

Firstly, religion.

Who, religiously speaking, is the Ethiopian eunuch? This has been a prominent debate historically. Are they a gentile? - as Irenaeus of Lyon, Bede, and Martin Luther, among others, have argued. Are they a proselyte, a full convert to Judaism? - As, others argued, like Jean Calvin, Lancelot Andrewes and John Wesley. Or are they what was called a 'god-fearer', a gentile sympathiser but not a full convert of Judaism? - as others, like the notable modern scholar Jack T. Sanders, have argued.

The answer remains ambiguous. For, on one hand, the eunuch should be a proselyte, as, elsewhere in Acts, Luke records Cornelius as the first gentile convert. Yet, on the other hand, they should be a god-fearer, as Deuteronomy 23.1 proscribes a castrated person, aka an eunuch, from becoming a proselyte or convert.

Perhaps, as Ernst Haenchen proposed, following the Tübingen school of biblical criticism, it is Luke's genius that this story does not side with either a Hellenistic (Greek) or a Hebrew reading of how Christian community grew. No one religious tradition should predominate, Luke is saying. It is through the Holy Spirit that all can, and do, come to faith, irrespective of Hebrew background and whether they fit any spiritual tradition or none.

¹ Sean D. Burke *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts*, Augsburg Fortress 2013

² Cottrel B. Carson "Do You Understand Who You Are Reading?" *A Reading of the Ethiopian Eunuch Story (Acts 8.26-40) from a Site of Cultural Marronage* (Ph.D dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1999), 145

Secondly, class.

There is a deep ambiguity about the eunuch's class position and identity. Christian Tradition generally emphasises the eunuch as a person of great power, authority, and wealth. However, as modern scholars have pointed out, and dis/ability theorists might take further, the eunuch's class status was also compromised by their physical condition: their genitalia in this case rendering them as '*damaged goods*' (as Ronald J. Allen put it) in the eyes of many cultures, in addition to Judaism.

Furthermore, as others have recently asked, was the eunuch a free person or were they actually a slave, or someone who had been freed? Even if they were free or freed, would their physical condition not always link them with shame, subjugation, and a lesser status? Again, we will never know, but the ambiguity deliberately subverts our expectations and role markers.

Thirdly, race.

Whilst, from our very different circumstances, some would query how we can talk of race, as such, in the ancient world, there has undoubtedly been much reflection over the centuries on the eunuch's skin colour and ethnic origins. Much of this has, frankly, been quite racist, although African American and other scholarship has more recently reclaimed the Ethiopian eunuch as a figure of ancient black dignity. Once more, we find the eunuch as a figure of ambiguity, around whom huge fault-lines of oppression and liberation gather.

Fourthly, gender.

We then come to the Ethiopian's gender identity, perhaps the principal concern of biblical interpreters down the ages. Now, you may be pleased to hear that I am not going to trace the long and varied history of gender in both scripture and the wider Christian Faith. However, this has understandably become a subject of much interest in our own recent times. For the moment, suffice it to say that we are dealing with very different conceptions across Christian history. The recent modern era has held the narrowest, and most binary, views on gender, at least in the Western world and in Western, including missionary, influence more broadly across the globe.

The earliest centuries certainly held quite different gender perspectives, albeit deeply patriarchal and somewhat alien from our emergent contemporary perspectives in various respects. However, as we see in Jesus' own teaching, there was a clear understanding that gender was varied and nuanced, including more than one category of body and identity which fell under the description of 'eunuch'.

To use Jesus' own categorisation, was the Ethiopian in our story therefore someone who had been made a eunuch by others, or had they been born with particular characteristics, or had they themselves claimed a particular social and bodily identity for themselves? Is the eunuch then a 'man', as some would have perceived, or 'unmanned', as others would have perceived, or something else, including varieties of what we now call transgender or gender diverse? Once again, we will never know, and Luke's storytelling invites us to hold and transcend such ambiguity.

Fifthly, sexuality.

Luke's Ethiopian eunuch also defies sexual categorisation and subverts conventional norms, ancient and modern. For, in the service of promoting virginity and chastity, most Christian commentators have generally categorised eunuchs as unsexual. Yet other ancient literature indicates that eunuchs sometimes had a variety of sexual, as well as other, roles in society. Perhaps, like the difficulty many have had of imagining sexual possibilities between lesbian and other marginalised people, certain, and sadly enduring, male obsessions with particular genital features have also created blindness to the ambiguities of eunuchs' bodily and spiritual realities?

Luke's 'queering' storytelling.

Enough, for now, of the range of sacred ambiguities in what I regard as one of the most vital texts of the New Testament – and, yes. I freely confess my bias in this! For it is not so much simply that trans, gay, and other minoritised people, can see them/ourselves in this story, and then see them/ourselves elsewhere too in the Bible, and, even more importantly, as beloved by God. It is that Luke's story is not so much 'queer', as noun, by making visible hidden histories and living realities, as it is 'queering', as a verb, in challenging all kinds of attempts to categorise God's actions in human lives.

No wonder then that this story has been somewhat passed over in Christian Tradition: being somewhat ignored in contrast to Paul's conversion or Peter's dreaming, even though it precedes them in the Acts of the Apostles. For this story has also been used to encourage conventional churchy and imperialistic 'mission' and 'evangelism'. Yet, with all its multifaceted ambiguities, it actually witnesses to the much greater transformative mission and evangelism, the real 'good news', of God. This is Luke's intent: to call us into seeing and experiencing a much more extraordinary God than we have ever, or can ever, imagine.

God's promise and word through the eunuch.

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Part of the answer, I'd suggest, is found, in the spirit of the writer Luke, by looking at this story all ends up. Try asking, for instance, as few Christians ever have, not what Philip, the religious insider, may have said to the eunuch, but what the eunuch themselves might have said to Philip. For have you ever wondered why the eunuch wanted to know who the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah was? Might it just be that the eunuch had just read, in Isaiah chapter 56, the following promise: that, according to Isaiah, God says, *'to the eunuchs who keep my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will never be cut off.'*

Now, I ask you, if you are a eunuch, or in any way ambiguous and an outsider, isn't that such a 'comfort', a 'confidence', and a 'courage' text worthy of exploring further, and of taking deep into your heart, and sharing with others?! Unclobbering, sharing in the peace and healing that comes with the Holy Spirit, in the true meaning of baptism.

In the name of Jesus, the suffering servant, and great divine drag queen: embodied and understood by eunuchs, as the source of life and liberation, now and always, Amen.