

Acts8: 26 – 40. Philip and the Ethiopian

The first Christian in Britain – the first person ever to pray to Jesus Christ in Britain – may well have been black. I once heard an academic from New College make that suggestion, and his argument was simple. There is clear archaeological evidence from inscriptions that the Roman soldiers stationed at Hadrian's Wall included significant numbers of Africans: especially soldiers from Ethiopia. Already by that time Christianity had taken strong root in Ethiopia, so it is quite probable – he did not say more than that – that they included followers of Jesus Christ in their ranks.

It goes back to the story we read from the Book of Acts. The central figure in this account of conversion is from Ethiopia. He is a high official at the court of the queen there, and he is a black man. He has come to Jerusalem to worship. There is an irony here: because of his castration he was forbidden by Jewish law from entering the temple. As he rides home in his chariot he is reading the book of Isaiah; but he cannot understand what he is reading. Philip, a leader of the early church, encounters him on the road, and a dramatic conversation takes place.

The passage he is reading is Isaiah 53: *Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.* It is a passage that Christians still use to speak of Jesus – and in Acts chapter 8 that is exactly what Philip does. He tells the Ethiopian official about Jesus Christ – *the good news about Jesus* is what the story says – and this black man is so excited and thrilled and gripped that he asks to be baptized as a Christian there and then.

We know nothing more about him. The story says that he “went on his way rejoicing”. What we do know is that the Ethiopian Coptic church is one of the oldest churches in the world. Indeed there is a very ancient legend which tells that he was *sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but*

that the Son of this (God) had already made (His) appearance in human flesh. That at least suggests that the Coptic Ethiopian church, one of the oldest churches in the world, can trace its history all the way back to this story, and to this black man. And from that church may well have come these Roman soldiers who became the first Christians in Britain.

If you ever go to Jerusalem, you will go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built, perhaps, on the site of Calvary. The ownership of the church is a source of great inter-church argument, with seven churches each claiming at least part of it as theirs. Most tour guides won't take you up to the roof. You have to climb up from the souk on some precarious steps, and you will find a rickety door leading in to a small chapel. Usually you will find an old monk – maybe a couple – sitting there; sometimes you will hear him reading out loud. The language is Amharic, the ancient language of the Ethiopian church: for this tiny chapel on the extreme margin of the great church is the chapel of the Ethiopians: and while you will not recognize the language you know the story. For the monk will be reading Acts chapter 8 – the story of Philip and the Ethiopian man.

Black people are part of the most ancient fabric of our faith. Most of us think of Black Christians as a result of European missionary movements, but they have a history very much older than that. There were black Christians hundreds of years before there were Scottish Christians. It is European and American white Christianity which is the more modern phenomenon. And it is black Christianity which is growing in today's world.

Yet, in today's world -even in church circles - black people hardly ever receive the respect which is their right. I am much afraid of the growth of racism. Are you also increasingly afraid of racism? Do you, like me, feel that we are living in an increasingly racist society?

It was in Edinburgh, this city, in 2018, this year, that a black man gave up his job and went to live and work in Uzbekistan because he could no longer stand Edinburgh racism. I refer to Isma Goncalves: a professional footballer who played for Hearts. He said he could not take it any more: his family had

stopped coming to games because of the racist abuse that was hurled at him: week after week, by his own fans. He comes from Guinea-Bissau in Africa, but he believes Uzbekistan will be more civilised than Scotland. It should make us weep.

Twenty-five years ago Stephen Lawrence was murdered. There have been programmes on television about his death in the last couple of weeks. They were called “The murder that changed a nation”. Some of it was familiar enough: the dignity of his mother, the intervention of Nelson Mandela, the unforgettable Daily Mail headline of “Murderers” : but overall the effect of the programmes was terrible. The staggering lack of sympathy for Stephen Lawrence himself – no better illustration of that than that his parents had to keep insisting that he was a decent boy who liked football and wanted to be an architect because everyone assumed - even the police assumed -if he was a black teenager he must be a gangster. It was the Stephen Lawrence affair which led to the Macpherson Report: a Report which coined the phrase “institutional racism” as a description of the police investigation. Doreen Lawrence – perhaps we ought to call her by her proper title Baroness Lawrence to make sure she is decent and respectable even though she is black – wondered in the programme “If it had been a white boy murdered that night would things have been different”. When you watch the programmes you know, you just know, the answer.

The term “institutional racism” caused great offence in some quarters. This morning I will use another term which causes great offence, but which must be used. Racism is sin. Racism is sin.

It’s not a word we use much in church nowadays. It points to narrow-mindedness, to a more judgemental kind of religion, to a particular concern with sex and drink. But it is a word we dare not lose. It is the Bible’s word for disobedience to God, for distancing ourselves from God’s will for the world and for each of us. So it is not just about private, individual morality. It is a word for greed and cruelty and selfishness and not paying our taxes and turning a blind eye to child abuse. It is the word for racism. Racism is sin. We are all made in the image of God: God is not white. Jesus Christ came to

break down barriers, not to build walls. Those of us who are white have inherited the benefits of racial injustice. The profits which flowed into Glasgow and Bristol from the slave trade were the profits of racism: riches here grew out of misery in Jamaica and Mississippi.

Once racism is named as sin we know what we must do. We must repent of racism in our society and in our hearts. We must repent and seek forgiveness. We must repent and seek forgiveness and build a better world.

And build a better world we can. Asked by the BBC to identify the defining moment in his life Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke of the day he and his mother, a poor washer-woman, were walking down the street. Tutu was nine years old. He told the BBC *A tall white man dressed in a black suit came towards us. In the days of apartheid, when a black person and a white person met walking on a footpath, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass. But this day, before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk the white man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!* The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid. It changed Tutu's life.

The first step is to repent. And then to build a better world.