

Connected

It's not every day that you are walking down a road away out in the desert and you come upon an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in a chariot. And were such a thing were to happen – just supposing -what are the chances that this Ethiopian eunuch, ensconced in his vehicle, would be reading from the prophet Isaiah? Well, it's often said that the Book of the Acts of the Apostles from which this story comes should really be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit for the Spirit is the driving force in the book, and it's quite clear that that Spirit is directing operations in this story, and when the Holy Spirit is at work then there's no saying what might happen, so nothing should surprise us. And what has led to this strange encounter that we read about? Well what has led to it is the persecution of the church which has reached new levels in chapter 7 of the Book of Acts with the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and as a result the followers of Jesus are scattering to avoid arrest, and that has taken a disciple called Philip to the town of Samaria where he has preached the Gospel and performed wonders, and now he is led by the Spirit down that desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. And there he meets our friend in his chariot studying his portion of Scripture.

How very quaint. Nowadays of course the Ethiopian eunuch would probably have his i-phone handy, checking his emails and text messages. After all, he is one important person. He is a court official of the Ethiopian queen Candace and in charge of her entire treasury. Wow! In British terms he's up there with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, no less. So he would be on his phone or his iPad, keeping in touch with the money markets when he's not on his state-of-the-art Kindle, reading his Isaiah passage. And maybe the reason that he is browsing the Scriptures is that, as we are told, he is returning from Jerusalem where he has gone to worship. Now, that's interesting because it immediately raises questions about this man and his identity. He has been to Jerusalem to worship, so does that mean that he is a Jew, albeit from Ethiopia? Possibly. Or does it perhaps mean that he is what is known as a God-fearer, a non-Jew, a Gentile, but one who identifies with the Jewish faith and worships the Jewish God but stops short of circumcision? Again, possibly, we don't know. However, what we do know for sure about this man is that he is a eunuch, either castrated or otherwise sexually impotent, as was common in

ancient times in royal courts like that of Queen Candace. And this means that no matter how much of a high-flyer in the Ethiopian court of Queen Candace he may have been, this man has a problem – and more than just the usual problems that come with being a eunuch. In a very graphic verse back in the Book of Deuteronomy that it's not very polite to read in church it is made clear that no eunuch can be accepted in the Assembly of the Lord. In other words, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, there was no way that this man could enter the temple. So granted that he has been up to Jerusalem to worship God, the likelihood is that he could only get so close to that God and he could not participate fully in worship. He must remain forever disconnected, separated. And what is interesting is that our passage says that this eunuch is reading is a portion from Isaiah about a sheep led to the slaughter, and that can only be Isaiah chapter 53, a passage which has been taken to refer to Jesus and his death. But I just wonder if perhaps the eunuch's eye had strayed across the scroll that he was reading to Isaiah 56. Because if he had looked there he might have seen a passage which looks forward to the day when, we are told, the God-fearing eunuch will no longer be excluded from God's people. Isaiah 56 looks forward to the day when the eunuch will no longer say 'I am just a barren tree' for he will be welcomed fully into Israel. In other words on that day the eunuch will no longer be a barren tree but rather a fruitful branch, connected to God's people.

Now, look what happens next. Philip explains to the eunuch the passage he is reading and then the eunuch asks for baptism. 'What's to prevent me being baptised?', he asks. And Philip, thankfully, does not say, 'well you can't be baptised because you're a eunuch, for a start' but rather baptises him in some water by the side of the road and this man enters fully into the assembly of God the people of God, disconnected and an outcast no more. For him the day foretold by Isaiah has finally and fully come as he, a eunuch, truly and completely belongs to the people of God. Or, in the language of our reading from John's Gospel, he is grafted into Christ, a branch of the vine that is Christ. He is one with Christ, united to Christ, connected in a far deeper and more complete way than ever before. Indeed that image of the vine and the branches that we are given in John's Gospel is such a profound picture of what it means to be connected to Christ, such that we are one with him and his life flows into ours like sap.

So we could say therefore that what links the story of the eunuch who is baptised and the image of the Vine in John's Gospel story is the image of connectedness. And it is fascinating to explore this image in our context today because I would suggest that 'connected' is a word that as much as any other describes our life today in this extraordinary high-tech world that we live in. Perhaps the dominant feature of life today is that we are connected as we never have been before. This of course is the age of computers, of e-mail, of mobile phones and i-pads and texts and social networks and our lives are very much like branches intertwined and tangled up in one another. And I joked about the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot with his smart phone but today that would be true, and the pressure to connect through technology is relentless. A day does not go by without someone trying to connect with me on some social network. And hell will freeze over before I ever join Facebook and yet still I am ensnared by connections that I have no wish to be part of. A while ago I received an e-mail telling me that a friend overseas was trying to contact me but in order to do so I had to join some network. I began the process but quickly broke it off, suspicious of all such things, yet thereafter I was assailed by e-mails from middle aged women on this network wanting to meet me! Welcome to the modern world – endless connection! And wherever they are now people compulsively open their lap-tops, their iPads, and they check their phones, their texts, their e-mails, their Facebook, their internet - because this is what it means to be connected. This is what it means to be networked and we cannot live without it, or so it seems. And where Jesus uses the image of the vine, we take the image of the web, and when it was once said that technology had turned the world into a global village, we have now become a world-wide web. And of course there are many good things about all this that we should celebrate – I know that - but surely it raises questions about that deeper connection that is essential to life. We are connected to each other, endlessly, intertwined like branches, a global network, a global web: but are we connected to anything deeper?

Let me broaden the horizon here a minute and take a bigger view. Let's turn our gaze away from that desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza and look instead up into the dark depths of the night sky. You may know that last month saw the twenty-fifth anniversary of the launching of the Hubble Space Telescope, launched from the space shuttle *Discovery* on April 24th 1990. After some initial hiccoughs it has been sending back ever since the most astounding pictures of the universe – of stars and galaxies and nebulae and dust clouds

millions of light years away. Looking at these pictures can make us feel so very small, so very lost and insignificant, tiny particles in a vast, cavernous cosmos. An article on Hubble in this month's National Geographic Magazine, however, makes an interesting comment. It speaks of these astonishing pictures from the far reaches of space that have been beamed to us via Hubble, and it links them to photos of earthly sunsets and mountain peaks and it concludes by suggesting that such views, such pictures 'affirm anew that nature is all of a piece, and the we're part of it.' In other words the pictures from Hubble combined with more local images in confirming our connectedness, our relatedness, even with the most distant frontiers of space, for surely we are all born of one Big Bang and we are all the debris, the scattered dust of explosions aeons ago. And in so many ways the new insights and understanding that come from scientists and cosmologists about the universe and its complexity reinforce this sense of connectedness, of being linked and bound together by common laws and processes that extend across these vast distances and time-spans. We are indeed all of a piece – connected, from the distant planet to the deepest proton.

The big question however, is whether or not we are connected to anything greater, anything deeper. To put it another way, are we just a web, a net of connections spanning the length and breadth of the universe, or are we a vine, attached to Christ and therefore rooted and grounded in God, rooted and grounded in love and in life? To return to that Ethiopian eunuch on the desert road, in his baptism something profound was happening to him. He was not just being connected to the temple from which he had been excluded due to his condition. In his baptism he was being connected to the vine, the very source of life – no longer, in Isaiah's words, a barren tree but now a fruitful branch. That the deeper connection that we, with our gadgets and our obsessive connectedness are in danger of losing. To be connected to the vine that is Christ is to be joined to that zone of love and life and liberation and salvation that has been planted in the midst of the world, and without it we become like withered branches.

This morning we gather round the table for Holy Communion. Here we recall that the same Jesus who said 'I am the Vine' also said 'I am the bread of life'. So come and feed on him and be re-connected to him and rooted in him. Be re-connected and rooted in the source of all things. Come with your joys and your sorrows and your burdens and your fears and be reconnected with the deep source of all life and love and peace. As we eat and drink his life mingles with

ours, like sap feeding branches. Here vine and branches are one. Let us pray that we may remain united with him, and fruitful. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
our Maker, our parent, our Lover,
source of all things that exist and giver of life,
we worship and praise you.
You have made us for yourself.
You have made us that we might know you,
and love you, and be known and loved by you.
You have made us that we might trust you
and honour you even as you honour us.
Yet God we acknowledge that our relationship
with you is broken.

We have become disconnected, estranged from you,
no longer bound to you in love and in joy.

We have broken the bond that holds us together.

And so we come to you, acknowledging
our sins and our failures to love you
and to love one another.

O God have mercy upon us we pray.

Forgive us.

And we thank you for Jesus in whom you have
reached out to us, to reconnect us and
to reconcile and to reunite us with you.

Send your Holy Spirit we pray upon us
to give us strength to live new lives
in friendship and fellowship with you.

We pray all these things in Jesus name

And in the words he taught us we joint together,
saying...

O God we thank you today for all the things that unite
and connect in this world,

for all that enhances communication and understanding
between human beings.

We thank you for the joys of family and friendship.

We thank you for common interests and common
causes that draw us together and that encourage us
to work together and to communicate with one another.

We thank you for the extraordinary means of communication

that we have, for telephones and for Skype
and for media of all kinds that put us in touch with one another.
Help us we pray to use these gifts responsibly.
Help us to use the internet wisely and in ways that
enhance life and knowledge and
that reinforce co-operation and community.
And as such gifts of technology bring the world into our homes,
We think of the images this week that we have witnessed
of death and destruction in Nepal.
O God draw near to the bereaved and the injured.
Bless rescue workers and relief agencies,
And may the world be united
in reaching out to Nepal at this time...
Oh God, we think today of situations where relationships
have broken down and where people have become disconnected.
We pray for those who are going through experiences
of estrangement and separation,
for people who are struggling with relationships
where trust and respect have broken down.
And we think of conflicts in our world where
People have learnt to hate and where we have lost sight
Of our common humanity and the things that connect us.
O God we pray for peace and reconciliation.
And as we come to your table we pray
For all those who would long to be here
but who cannot for whatever reason.
May they know that even though physically separate
they are one with us in and through the Holy Spirit
who connects and binds all things together in love.
We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.