

An Ethiopian eunuch. What did you think of when you heard that phrase in our first reading today? Presumably someone of African appearance, a man who looked like the Ethiopian migrants we're familiar with here in Australia. And presumably you thought as little as possible about the second descriptor: eunuch. But for first century Jews, both descriptors were important.

An Ethiopian – in other words, not a Jew, but nonetheless a worshipper of the true, living God. To understand how this could be, we need to go back to the time of King Solomon the wise, some 900 years before the time of Jesus. Solomon was so famed for his wisdom that people came from other lands to hear his judgements. One such visitor was the Queen of Sheba. You can read the story in 1 Kings 10. After quizzing Solomon and listening to his wisdom, the queen exclaims, 'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel!'

The royals exchange elaborate and expensive gifts, and then, once Solomon has given the queen 'every desire that she expressed', she returns to her own land, Sheba. And where was Sheba? Ethiopia.

The queen took home more than just royal gifts. According to both Ethiopian and Jewish tradition, she was pregnant to Solomon who had given her *all she desired*. But the queen carried home something more important than either Solomon's gifts or his unborn child: she carried his faith.

That is why this Ethiopian has come to Jerusalem to worship. Ever since that royal visit so long before, the God of Israel has been worshipped in Ethiopia. We don't know how widespread this was; the worship of traditional Ethiopian gods did continue. But this particular Ethiopian had travelled to Jerusalem to worship the true God in God's Temple.

The Temple was a huge building, several times the size of the MCG. It was surrounded by a collonade in which market stalls were set up. Inside, the Temple had four successive rooms, each entered from the previous one. The first and largest, the Court of the Gentiles, was open to anyone to come and worship. In all likelihood, this is where Jesus taught when he taught in the Temple.

Then, there was the Court of Women. Only Jews could enter here. This was followed by the Court of Men, where Jewish men, that is, those over the age of 13, worshipped, with some exceptions which I'll come to in a moment. The Court of Men was where the altar for sacrifices was. Finally, there was a small room, heavily curtained, the Holy of Holies, containing the Ark of the Covenant. Only priests could enter here and they only did so once a year.

So when this Ethiopian went to the Temple to worship, which Court did he worship in? He was certainly welcome in the Court of the Gentiles, but could he enter the Court of Men? He worshipped the Jewish God, but was he a Jew? This was debatable. If a man from another nation wanted to convert to Judaism, he had to be circumcised. That is still true. But if such a man was circumcised, he could theoretically worship in the Court of Men.

And now we come to the other descriptor of this man in the chariot. He was not just an Ethiopian; he was a eunuch. This would exclude him from the Court of Men, and even from the Court of Women. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1 – and please note, I am reading Scripture: 'No man whose testicles are crushed shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.' So, no eunuchs.

This man worshipped the God of Israel. He also knew his Scriptures – after all, that's what he was reading in his chariot. He made the lengthy journey to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, knowing that, despite his faith, he would be excluded from the inner courts. Yet he went.

Why? Why would someone already marginalised, seen as incomplete, deviant, why would such a person subject himself voluntarily to further exclusion? Because he wants to worship God. And perhaps, too, because he senses that, despite the law, God will not exclude him.

This Ethiopian was reading Isaiah. He may not have had the whole book with him – it is, after all, very long, more than one scroll's worth – but he would have had more than a few verses. He was reading chapter 53, but I suspect he knew chapter 56.

Do you? Most Christians know Isaiah 53, but very few seem to know Isaiah 56. Let me read you verses 3 to 5:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;
and do not let the eunuch say,
‘I am just a dry tree.’
For thus says the Lord:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast 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 shall not be cut off.

The Ethiopian eunuch – a foreigner joined to the Lord, a eunuch. Surely, for this man, these verses would have sounded as if they were addressed to him. The law of Deuteronomy excludes him from worshipping with God's people because he is incapable of fathering children who would carry on his name. But the prophet Isaiah promises that, in God's house, within God's walls, God will give him an everlasting name better than children. And then he meets Philip, and learns how Isaiah's promise is fulfilled.

Through the book of Acts, we see the first Christians slowly come to the realisation that the gospel is for all people, including, especially, those marginalised by secular and religious society: women, slaves, the disabled, Gentiles. Today's story occurs before Peter meets Cornelius, before Paul goes to the Gentiles. This is the first step: the gospel is for this Ethiopian eunuch.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church traces its origins back to this man. Irenaeus of Lyons knew the tradition and wrote of it around the year 180:

This man was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed ...

This man, an outsider twice over, knew himself to be immersed in the love of God revealed in Christ. He went home and shared this knowledge ... and as a result, there are now close to 50 million Ethiopian Christians. Let us go and do likewise.

Amen.