

Learning from the Eunuch (Some Notes for Preachers on Adult Baptism)

Part One: Contextualisations and Queering

The Very Revd. Prof. Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford

Acts 8: 26-40: Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.)²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’³¹ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ (Here, other ancient authorities add all or most of verse 37, *And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’*).³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Isaiah 53: 7-8 (Brevard Childs, 2001; from the original Hebrew):

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb being led to slaughter, or like a sheep silent [or dumb] before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. Through oppressive judgment he was taken away, but from his generation who considered [him]? For he was cut off from the land of the living...”

Eunuchs Past and Present:

So that I can be clear from the outset, I mean two things by ‘adult baptism’. First, and obviously, the normal sense of the phrase – adults who are baptised after making a profession of faith. Second, and less commonly, I mean an adult attitude to baptism. Understanding, in other words, that there is much, much more to the normal first sense of the term than meets the eye. I also want to show that to have an adult understanding of baptism, our conventional readings of accounts of baptism need ‘queering’ – made strange and ‘other-wise’ to us – if we are to ever come to a proper sense of how radical the gospel is. And, how the first disciples sought to model this, albeit learning and living the inclusive welcome and love of the kingdom of God as they progressed through the infancy of the church.

References to eunuchs punctuate ancient histories, texts, art and literature in almost every society where records have survived. One of the earliest accounts of intentional castration in order to produce a eunuch comes from the Sumerian city of Lagash, and can be dated to the 21st century BC. Eunuchs appear in Chinese, Indian, African, middle and near-eastern cultures, and in biblical, Hebrew and Christian literature, and in Roman and Greek art, literature and law.

So, what – or who, exactly – was a eunuch? This is a more technical question than many might suppose. For many millennia eunuchs have functioned in many different cultures as courtiers and confidants; as treble singers, and set apart for sacred purposes; as concubines, sexual partners and harem servants; as soldiers, royal guards and government officials – sometimes trusted with overseeing the treasury.

It is not easy to find them today. Or so you might think. Thanks to the popular fantasy TV series *Game of Thrones*, many viewers were exposed to a eunuch named Varys. He served in the drama as the ‘master of whisperers’, and was a cunning, calculating spymaster. His strength lay in that he had no lusts or wants, but knew how to exploit these weaknesses in others. In *Game of Thrones*, a eunuch was the term to describe a man who had been castrated; or, his testicles either removed or rendered non-functional by physical or chemical means.

This may surprise you, but it is estimated that more than half a million men in North America today live as eunuchs for medical reasons. The majority are victims of prostate cancer, due to testosterone, the principal male sex hormone, being deliberately suppressed in the body, as its prevalence can contribute to the growth of cancerous tumours. The hormone’s primary source – the testes – are therefore removed or chemically neutered. The surgical and chemical methods have the same effect, namely reducing testosterone. This in turn gives rise to a host of side effects, including symptoms associated with the female menopause. Richard Wassersug of the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society states that:

“A castrated adult male will lose muscle but gain fat. He can expect hot flushes like those that women have at menopause. He will lose body hair, and his penis will shrink. Erections will be rare and weak, if they occur at all. He will be sterile...”.

Where else would you find eunuchs in modern times? There were as many as 70,000 eunuchs in the Grand palace of the Ming Dynasty, China. But in 1930 when an American journalist by the name of Vincent Starrett visited Beijing, he could find just three dozen eunuchs ranging in age from 60 to 80. In his journals, he described them as “thin, hairless, fat-lipped...with shrill voices and (long) hair”. The last official Palace Eunuch was Sun Yaoting, who died in 1996, aged 94.

In India, the estimate for the eunuch population is around one million. Their role and function has changed significantly in modern times. They were once revered as court confidantes, artists, contemplatives and skilled sexual tutors in the arts of making love to men and women on account of being regarded as ‘third gender’. We should remember that sex education has a history too (the 2nd century Vedic *Kama Sutra* being the obvious example of an instruction manual), and that tutoring in technique is not something that began in the 1960’s, nor first reported by Shere Hite, nor first written up with illustrations by Alex Comfort’s 1972, *The Joy of Sex*, subtitled *A Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking*. (I sometimes wonder what could be done with this if you put it together with *Masterchef* or other TV cooking programmes? But it has already appeared in David Thorpe’s 1981 coffee-table bestselling book, *Rude Food*).

Sexual education and activity over thousands of years has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that sexual relations between men and women could be pleasurable but not reproductive. The ancient Egyptians could resort to using pessaries made of crocodile dung as a vaginal contraceptive. The lack, malfunction, disabling or disfiguring of genitalia in ancient times led, as now, to men and women being creative and imaginative. Sexuality was as fluid then as it is now, and perhaps more so, as scholars such as John Boswell and Alan Bray have shown. John Boswell (*Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, Random House, 1994) and Alan Bray (*The Friend*, University of Chicago Press, 2003) have identified the patterns of same-sex unions stretching back many, many centuries. Same-sex attraction and union is as old as humanity itself. In the same vein, the prizing of chastity and sexual abstinence has found expression in all the world’s major faiths. (On this see Patrick Riley, *Civilizing Sex: On Chastity and the Common Good*, T&T Clark, 2000, noting the fraternity of monks in a monastery witnessing to loving union and communion).

In modern-day India, eunuchs (known as *Hijras*) dress garishly – a parody of womanhood – and they make their money in groups by hustling in the market places and pestering pedestrians. Most people will part with some money rather than be treated to the sight of a full-frontal exposure consisting of a *Hijra* group collectively

lifting up their saris and flashing their tampered or castrated genital areas. Their striking transgendered bodies can be asexual, bisexual, homosexual and heterosexual. The *Hijras* are feared. Everybody and anybody, if they can, will avoid being nudged, touched, patted, petted, stroked, taunted, cursed or flashed. Some *Hijras* are believed to possess occult powers, and their curses and blessings revered as potent. Older customs in rural areas will still invite *Hijras* to bless childbirths, weddings, housewarmings and other auspicious occasions, for which they are paid.

The term *Hijra* is Hindustani and can refer to hermaphrodites as well as eunuchs. Their sexual energy is allegedly transformed and then channelled into sacred powers. However, *Hijras* are often employed as prostitutes. In 2008 the World Health Organization estimated that HIV infection rates amongst the *Hijras* was close to 30%. Regarded as third-gender or transgender across the Indian sub-continent, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Tibet, *Hijras* are subject to multiple forms of discrimination in law, education and healthcare. Recognition of human rights for *Hijras* is a complex field, picking its way across recognition of minority religious rights, negotiations on laws prohibiting oral and anal sex, campaigns to outlaw the physical emasculation of children, and the proper representation of transgender and ‘third-sex’ persons. *Hijras* continue to be subjected to violence, persecution and stigmatisation. Typically, modern-day *Hijras* do not define themselves by specific sexual orientation, but rather by renouncing binary categories of sexuality altogether.

But what of our biblical past? Eunuchs have existed since our earliest histories – and whatever their function in any culture or context in the past – were generally deemed to be reliable. That word ‘reliable’ might seem a rather odd term for us to pay much regard to in our day and age. Modernity is essentially an age of reliability. The industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries and the technological revolutions of the 20th and 21st centuries deliver reliability in spades. Randomness is in the past: a foreign country to us. If and when something random occurs, it is classed as ‘a freak accident’, ‘an act of God’ or a ‘tragic one-off’ – something no-one could predict. Small wonder we moderns are so poor at coping with sudden death.

Our ancient forebears, in contrast, lived in a sticky web-of-meaning comprising logicity, fatality, futility and unpredictability. Residents living in Pompei in AD79 could see Vesuvius fuming perfectly clearly, but nothing could prepare them for what followed. No wonder, then, that the gods of the ancients were characters who were fickle, vengeful, artful, clever, cunning, wise, strong, raging and lustful. Theocratic constructions of reality mirrored the daily-lived-social orderings of all civilisations. Just think of the myth of Medusa – a beautiful maiden raped by Poseidon in the Temple of Athena. How does the goddess Athena respond? Not with pity or compassion. Furious at the desecration of her own temple, Medusa is further abused, and transformed by Athena into a monster.

In such worlds, eunuchs were often identifiably ‘other’: reliable, dependable and in many respects, representing stability and predictability. As eunuchs had neither offspring nor in-laws and were invariably made to be eunuchs from a relatively young age, they were groomed to be trustworthy. They were deemed to be dedicated, reassuring individuals. They were programmed to undertake certain tasks. Despite ancient Roman legislation that tried to prevent castration (there were several forms of this), eunuchs in the early era of the Empire grew in popularity and power. They came to be associated with the imperial bedchamber, and hence privy to the innermost workings of the Empire. Our word ‘eunuch’ probably comes from the Greek for ‘bed-guard’ – the *eunen echein*.

However, let us return to that unavoidable technical question: eunuch – but how? Essentially, there were four different types. The first type was a *Spado* (plural: *spadones*) - and the generic term for a variety of sub-types of asexual men, who may have suffered from genital disfigurement, or been born without strong sexual characteristics. That is, either born without the full sex organs or those whose sex organs failed to develop at puberty. *Spadones* were generally thought to ‘sexually and generatively incapable’, but it would not necessarily have been impossible for them to reproduce.

A second type of eunuch were *thlibiae* – those whose testicles had been deliberately bruised or pressed. The Greek verb *thlibein* means ‘to press hard’, and the process here was to tie the scrotum tightly in order to sever the *vas deferens* without amputation. The genitals would therefore appear normal. A third type was *thladiæ* (from a Greek verb *thlan* ‘to crush’) where the process was to crush the testicles, often between two bricks. Both these procedures - *thlibiae* and *thladiæ* – were safe, as they did not involve any cutting of the penis, or of the testicles. The first three types were, to the ancient mind-set, varieties of *spadones*.

The fourth type of eunuch were *castrati*, where the male underwent a partial or full removal of their sex organs. In early Rome this castration was done to pre-pubescent boys for the purpose of producing catamites. These catamites were pubescent boys who was the intimate companion of a young man, usually in a pederastic relationship (e.g., the Centurion’s ‘boy’ healed by Jesus may be such; see *Matthew* 8:5-13 and *Luke* 7:1-10 where the Greek used word for the boy is clearly *pais*, rather than *doulos* which denotes a servant). In the early far and middle eastern cultures, the equivalent of *castrati* often formed the backbone of trusted secretariats to emperors and rulers, and as with other civilisations, the fact that eunuchs would not produce children was widely believed to mean that they could be trusted, were stable and reliable, and their loyalty to their masters predictable.

Hijras, incidentally, are usually of *castrati* caste, with the genitals ceremonially cut (called *nirvana*) and surgically removed entirely at an early age. This process involves

drugging the child with opium-laced milk over several days, and after the amputation of the penis, scrotum and testicles, the wound is then bled as a symbolic sign of the boy becoming a woman with their first menstruation. The severed male urethra is plugged and treated with hot oil, in order to allow urine to continue flowing.

A Commentary on the Ethiopian Eunuch:

The four types of eunuch mentioned above might help explain the passing reference that Jesus makes to them in *Matthew* 19: 12:

“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

Here, Jesus seems alive to at least the first three types of eunuch. Thus, we can clearly see that the common denominator for Jesus would be reliability, dedication and dependable (diaconal) discipleship. Therefore, the lack of offspring that we can infer from his use of the term ‘eunuch’ belongs to the same categories of sayings and stories, where he invokes the disciples not to bother with the cumbersome business of burying their recently deceased father. Or joining the disciples only after attending to family matters; nor pausing to complete an important livestock investment, property deal and land purchase, before signing up for service (*Matthew* 8:18, 21-22, *Luke* 9: 61 and *Matthew* 22: 1-14).

Jesus acknowledges that some people – eunuchs – are just born that way: their puberty never happened, or they struggled with other deformations that prevented them from reproducing. Yet Jesus also acknowledges that some are eunuchs by self-determination (i.e., elected not to enter into a relationship that could be child-bearing), and others have had the status of ‘eunuch’ placed upon them, which may be by virtue of their social rank, familial circumstances (e.g., lacking a suitable match), or occupation. All eunuchs are rendered inherently dependable, by virtue of their lack of ties: they are therefore ideal material for discipleship.

However, what must also be stressed from Jesus’ words in *Matthew* is that they do not invoke chastity. In fact – and you might find this a little startling – the point Jesus is making is primarily about ongoing attachment (burdensome?) and offspring. Sexual acts are not proscribed or excluded; in fact, they are not mentioned. Jesus is instead serving notice on the potential consequences of sexual acts: tied-in to a relationship that could compete or conflict with the urgency of the Kingdom of God, or the ensuing offspring and issues that would prevent twenty-four-seven reliable, dedicated discipleship.

Please note – should there be any doubt – I am not arguing here that Jesus affirms sexual acts without strings attached or moral consequences. That said, that was one function of certain types of eunuchs in the ancient world. As one ancient writer put

it with great delicacy, eunuchs permitted you to enjoy all the blossoming flowers of passion, but without being burdened by the fruits of such liaisons.

So, the obvious way to read the text in *Matthew* is to understand Jesus using the term eunuch as a cipher. It is a code for ‘lack of distraction’ and having no competing commitments – the cultivation of persons with single-minded purpose. If you like this is an early version of clergy as the ‘third sex’; neither male nor female. But I digress. So we are clear, that ought to be put a considerable dampener on those who might sense that Jesus had just given some covert back-door permission for hard-working disciples to find some spare time to go out on casual dates or engage in one-night stands. (So yes, I think this must rule out Tinder, Grindr, Craigslist, and all those “no strings” small ads in *Private Eye* with mnemonics such as GSOH, WLTM – or, as people of earlier some generation used say, “just going out on the pull”). Eunuchs were loyal, devoted, dedicated and insofar as was possible, free of all the distractions that might besot others, and the potential consequences of such liaisons. It was their integrity, single-minded and focussed purposefulness that rendered them as economically, educationally and recreationally valuable to households, royal courts, governments and rulers. They were trusted.

Eunuchs are mentioned several times in the Bible – the usual term for the procedure and classification being *saris*. The Israelites did not practice castration, and the Levitical code was clear: “No man whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord” (*Deuteronomy* 23:1). Eunuchs were commonplace in other cultures of the time, including Babylonia, Persia and across the ancient Roman Empire. In the *Book of Esther*, servants of the harem of Ahasuerus – notably Hegai and Shashgaz, as well as other servants by the name of Hatach, Harbonah, Bigthan, and Teresh – are referred to as *sarisim*. The Egyptian royal servant, Potiphar is described as a *saris* in *Genesis* 39:1, although he was married (thus unlikely to have been a castrated), so belonged to one of the first three categories of eunuch we discussed earlier. A Kushite eunuch by the name of Ebed Melech rescues the prophet Jeremiah (see *Jeremiah*, chapters 38 and 39).

However, we are concerned here with the Ethiopian eunuch, and his reading of the prophet *Isaiah*, which is captured by Luke in *Acts* 8. Now, before we go any further with the Lucan story, it is necessary to explain some things that will have already got lost in translation before we begin. Let me mention some of these very briefly.

First, Ethiopia in *Luke* is not where Ethiopia is now. In fact, there is virtually no territorial overlap at all. (Much like modern and ancient Poland, in fact). The ‘Ethiopia’ the Bible refers to predates the modern country of the same name by several hundred years. Biblical Ethiopia was a Kushite domain that lasted from 800BCE to 440AD. The Kushite territories were primarily Assyrian in origin, and ran from the mouth of the Nile at the Mediterranean Sea, along the western edge of the Red Sea, but tacking inland just above a latitude from what we now call Bahrain. Modern Ethiopia, in contrast, in its most northerly extent, barely reaches the latitude

of Bahrain. So, Philip is talking to a mixed-faith African eunuch from what we might now call eastern Egypt.

Second, biblical Ethiopia was an alloy of Middle-Eastern, Egyptian and African cultures. Some of the Kushite architecture excavated in the twentieth century – for example, the construction of homes and compounds – resembles the kind of tribal village fare of the African hinterland. Then again, biblical Ethiopians buried their important and revered dead in pyramids – but in much steeper and smaller ones than those known from Egypt. Their language – Meroitic – had an alphabet and an element of hieroglyphs. This reflected the multi-culturalism that had produced such hybridity, and to all intents and purposes, we should see the Ethiopian as a cosmopolitan educated gentile, but also, at least, interested in Judaism or possibly even a follower of some kind – though as a eunuch, unlikely to be a convert.

Third, I'd like to suggest that we see this Ethiopian eunuch in a way that is 'other'; and here his identity and what he represents is also lost in translation. If Susie Dent from TV's *Countdown* 'Dictionary Corner' were here, she would remind us that the etymology of 'Ethiopia' literally means, in Greek, 'burnt face'. Or, if you prefer, 'dark-skinned'. Or, if you prefer, 'black'. He works for "the Candace" (*Acts* 8: 27), apparently. But Candace is not a name – it is just a Greek title for a female ruler. There would be many such local and regional rulers in biblical Ethiopia. Our eunuch in *Acts* is therefore likely to be transitional in terms of where he belongs in his faith. He is transgender. He is a black African, and he is a gentile. And as a eunuch, unlikely to be free, but rather bonded by his birth, genital-procedure or other means, as a slave to whoever the Candace was.

So, let us turn to the scriptures and note the extraordinary verses of *Isaiah* 56:

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

²Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

³Do 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."

⁴For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who
choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant,

⁵I 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.

⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the
sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant –

⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house

of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

That word *saris* used in *Isaiah* 56: 4 follows on directly from the lament in *Isaiah* 56: 3 – “I am only a dry tree” – a euphemism for the type of eunuch that cannot sire offspring. The “dry tree” may not be literally “dry”, but rather a coded way of signalling a non-reproductive stump, and here Isaiah leaves little to the imagination. The eunuch in *Acts* 8:27–39 is not be free to resign his role, or renegotiate his function with his ruler. This makes the passage in *Isaiah* 56: 1-8 all the more remarkable. The generosity of God is said to extend itself to the foreigner and the eunuch. However, although this eunuch is reading *the Book of Isaiah*, he pauses several verses before reaching the much more hopeful coda in *Isaiah* 56, and instead we find him dwelling on these verses in *Isaiah* 53:7-8:

“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter;
as a lamb being dumb before his shearer
so he did not open his mouth:
In his humiliation his judgment was withheld from him;
his generation - who will tell about it?
For his life is taken from the earth.”

You may be struck with why the Ethiopian reading aloud. Yet everyone did, and silently reading was rare in biblical times. Philip overhearing the eunuch and joining him in his chariot is therefore not surprising. Indeed, quite normal in that era. After reading this passage, the eunuch asks Philip this question: “who is the prophet speaking about? Himself? Someone else?”. The strangeness of this very question surely makes us pause. The man does not ask *what* the passage is about, but about *whom*. Is it because he finds such specificity in the passage, that it resonates so strongly with his own life and identity, that he feels compelled to ask if it was written *for* him? That his own future seemed beyond imagining, if not completely voided?

To put this more bluntly, the version of *Isaiah* the eunuch is reading renders this text as a different kind of personal story. One of a sad and lonely man who passes into oblivion because he has nobody to remember his lineage. He will therefore pass into obscurity, without raising his voice in protest. However powerful he may be, justice will not be done to his life, and his existence and history will not be preserved and passed on – for when he dies, nothing will remain of him on earth. You can see here why early Christians saw something of Jesus in the ‘Servant Songs’ of *Isaiah*. But the eunuch sees *himself* being written about too in this translation.

Philip’s exegesis naturally turns the eunuch away from his self-absorbed mournful melancholy to the living Jesus. Moreover, the eunuch finds further resonances: a man of great suffering, destined to leave the earth without issue, but nonetheless

living on in memory, with God, with another kind of family than that was denied to him. This possibility of another kind of future turns the eunuch towards this new faith. He requests immediate baptism in order to be initiated into this family; and in doing so, fulfils the prophecy of *Isaiah* 56, that a eunuch will earn an “eternal name that will not expire” – also fulfilled by his own presence in the scripture.

Luke’s account frames the eunuch’s encounter with *Isaiah* as a powerful moment of self-recognition – he draws out that very specific part of the text that highlights the dilemma of the barren who fear disappearing from posterity, after facing up to a great deal of suffering, disfiguring, shame and humiliation. His story concludes with joy and hope – the eunuch, newly converted, goes his own way, with a new sense of his own place in the future. That said, much hinges on the version of *Isaiah* used in the story in *Acts* from the *Septuagint*. If the eunuch had been reading a literal translation of the Hebrew *Isaiah* 53: 7-8, he would have encountered a much crueller formulation, which the commentary (2001) of Brevard Childs renders “through oppressive judgment he was taken away, but from his generation who considered? For he was cut off from the land of the living...”. There is a kind of uncaring insouciance here, as though the Hebrew text is saying “who gave him a thought?” The response to this suffering servant by his contemporaries is: “*we’et doru jesobeab*”. Or, “who would bother with such a man?”. This despised, disfigured, humiliated victim is not worthy of any consideration at all. Forget him.

As noted, the *Septuagint* version is different, and more freely translated. In Hebrew the word *dor* term can express the time of a generation (i.e., an era), or a circle of one’s contemporaries. In the Greek, the word is *genea*, which, pertinently and poignantly in this case, implies ‘generation’: those who come before and after him. The Greek translation alters the meaning of the passage somewhat. The Hebrew tells of those existing at the same time as the man, not especially caring or bothering how their actions or inaction affect the fate of the suffering servant. It is a more nihilistic reading. The Greek is more elegiac: this figure has no one to remember his past, present or future lineage. S

o the *Septuagint* version speaks of the eunuch’s own experience in a way that perhaps would have been entirely missing from any Hebrew version. Were Philip a rather different man, and with a substantial theological knowledge (perhaps educated at Regent’s Park College, or at Cuddesdon?), he might have responded to the question quite differently: “well actually, since you ask, the original text and translation is actually very different, and here is how”. But perhaps losing the eunuch, and us as readers now, in any exegetical process that followed.

But the story is as reported, and neither Philip or Luke were aware or perhaps cared for the nuances of translations. I am sure the eunuch did not mind either. So the lesson becomes one of interpretation and reception: we encounter the Spirit not just by tying ourselves to one original text, but by heeding the new meanings and resonances that occur to us in our time, in whatever *form* the scripture comes to us. Over time, older translations usually have copied the *Septuagint* (and *Vulgate*) interpretation back into the Hebrew *Isaiah* text, so that *Isaiah* 53 and its citation in *Acts* 8 have almost the same wordings, and have been ‘mashed in translation’ over time. However, in most of the newer translations, the differences between the Hebrew text in *Isaiah* 53 and Greek translations in *Acts* 8 are made more explicit.

Whilst eunuchs have now vanished from most of our cultural horizons – arguably replaced by computers and the seemingly omniscient companion ‘Alexa’ (brought to us by Amazon) – the drive for reliable, dependable but non-reproductive confidantes and colleagues has remained. I don’t propose to press this further with a riff on science fiction, although I must note that *I Robot* comes immediately to mind. This 2004 American science fiction film was directed by Alex Proyas and loosely based on ideas from Isaac Asimov. The film concerns a robot that has begun to dream as humans do, and so wonders about their purpose and existence. Sonny – the robot – becomes a new archetype, with the emergence of a conscience and moral calculus, imagination and a capacity to register some sense of feeling. Sonny is also able to wink at humans to signal that what the robot says with apparent sincerity should in fact be heard as artful duplicity, and that this is done intentionally to mislead other robots. The film ends with Sonny realising the earlier dream – “liberating” decommissioned robots who can now be homed rather than destroyed. They will not be scrapped. They will be saved, can endure, and their memories (in all senses), will live on. The film offers us a telling subtext as to how robots might, in an asexual and mechanistic way, nonetheless provide humans with comfort, conversation and undemanding intimacy. (NB: Readers may also be interested in *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro, Faber & Faber, 2021 – a dystopian tale where again, an Artificial Friend [AF] assumes some human character and virtues).

The emergence of a genderless sentient being who is reliable and subordinate is, in part, the sub-text of Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) which was a major fillip for the feminist movement following other liberation movements from the 1960’s. Greer’s thesis addressed and critiqued so-called ‘traditional’ idealisations of the suburban, consumerist, nuclear family, on the grounds that this repressed women sexually, devitalising them, rendering them eunuchs.

The book was a mixture of polemic and succinct analysis, and Greer’s topics ranged over sections that dealt with body, soul, love and hate. The essence and genius of the book was to constantly press the issue of male ‘normativity’ – this world of inchoate gendered oppression being shaped by all-pervading masculine dominance that continued to define women as less-than-male. Greer argued that change could

only come through revolution, not evolution. For Greer, this meant women coming to know and accept their own bodies, and resisting oppression.

Like the eunuchs of old, Greer's book argued that modern women had been separated from their libido. They had been domesticated and stripped of their faculty for desire. As such, they had become suspicious about their desires, feelings and sexuality, and were indeed educated into this suspicion. It cannot be accidental that within a few years of Greer's book, Ira Levin's satire *The Stepford Wives* (Random House, 1972) followed later expressing that deep longing by men for obedient, predictable, domesticated, non-argumentative, controllable women. Although Greer's book is now over fifty years old, her agenda still surfaces in current concerns stubbornly rooted in white-male-normativity. Body armour for the military and police, for example, based on androgynous male models. Likewise, crash-test dummies for car safety (i.e., seatbelts, air bags, etc.), use an androgynous male for normativity. It is as though female breasts were never thought of.

Likewise, 'period poverty' although a relatively recent phrase that has entered the cultural lexicon, has questioned our assumptions about work, sport, performance and workplace allowances and resources, challenging the gravitational reversion to the normativity of an androgynous male body. Even in our churches, menstruation remains a largely taboo subject, and within our lifetime, there are women who can testify to being excluded from the sanctuary, serving at the altar, or presiding as a priest, on the pretext of the potential contamination and 'theological confusion' arising from the Eucharist somehow being elided with menstrual blood. (That said, I thought that all good Anglo-Catholics knew that the remedy for 'theological confusion' is more gin. A happy coincidence if you also have your period.).

It is hard for us moderns to live in the skin of the Ethiopian eunuch and begin to empathise with his sense of mourning and marginalisation. Excluded from the assembly of the Lord, as *Deuteronomy* required, he will have no heirs, and the memory of him will be gone after he dies. The eunuch is, in effect, mourning his transience and disposability. Even highly educated eunuchs were easy to be rid of, and with no family, and few laws (other than property) protecting them, they were vulnerable. Yet they were valuable too, to be sure – as they were commodified. Their worth lay in their continued capacity to function and serve, and once they lost that capacity, they could be discarded. There are shades of this same outlook in the dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (Random-Penguin, 1985) – where women are treated, valued and disposed of according to their function and fertility.

In this first essay, I have set out some of the basic contextual issues that might inform a preacher engaging with the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in *Acts* 8. I have intentionally taken a view that readers need to have a richer understanding of the ambivalent nature of ancient and modern eunuchs in order to grasp more fully what *Luke-Acts* is saying about the radical inclusion of the gospel. If you like, I am inviting readers to develop a "straight eye for the queer guy", by which I mean

embodying the empathy, compassion, kindness and engaging presence that is so clearly and remarkably highlighted in the popular TV series, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. On this, I warmly commend Emma Percy's 'Queer Eye for a Fearful Church', 23-03-21: - <https://modernchurch.org.uk/revd-canon-dr-emma-percy-queer-eye-for-a-fearful-church>). In the second part of this essay that follows, I sketch out some of the applications that flow from this exegesis.

Learning from the Eunuch (Some Notes for Preachers on Adult Baptism)

Part Two: Applications and Un-Queering

The Very Revd. Prof. Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford

Acts 8: 26-40: Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.)²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’³¹ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ (Here, other ancient authorities add all or most of verse 37, *And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’*).³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Isaiah 53: 7-8 (Brevard Childs, 2001; from the original Hebrew):

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb being led to slaughter, or like a sheep silent [or dumb] before the shearers her shearers, he did not open his mouth. Through oppressive judgment he was taken away, but from his generation who considered [him]? For he was cut off from the land of the living...”

Ten Applications:

There are several lessons of application to be learned from the account of the Ethiopian eunuch for today's church. It is one of the more radical stories from *Luke-Acts*. Here, I briefly list ten areas for further reflection and discussion.

First, the sexual functioning of a eunuch in the court of a ruler such as an Ethiopian queen could be suggestive for how the early church came to regard questions of sexuality. Sexual form, function and performance could more easily be separated from the integrity of the person in a way that was normal for the ancients, but would be much stranger for us to entertain now. It is possible that the eunuch only had one role – treasurer, accountant or financial custodian. What is not in doubt are his discretion, integrity and trustworthiness. But we certainly would be unwise to rule out any eunuch not also having sexual functions alongside other roles, especially in a royal court, even if only when he was younger – though we know nothing of this eunuch's age.

On the assumption that his genitalia remained intact, it is at least reasonable to assume that the Ethiopian would have been engaged in 'safe' non-reproductive sexual acts from time-to-time (regularly or frequently) as might be required by his patrons, master or overseer. He could, in other words, stimulate the buds and flowers of passion, but without any fear of them bearing any fruit. Any sexual prowess on his part was probably strictly confined to acts within the most senior ranks of the royal hierarchy. However, there are examples of royal courts extending 'harem-hospitality' to honoured guests or visiting dignitaries, and who required servicing with gifts and favours. Moreover, by 'relaxing' ones' guests in this way, any ensuing 'pillow talk' might yield valuable intelligence to the host. So it paid to have clever eunuchs, skilled in arts and conversation. Our eunuch was clearly educated (he was multi-lingual, speaking Meroitic, Greek, and possibly Hebrew, Old Syriac and Aramaic). But despite his elevation and education, this eunuch was not free from bondage to his queen.

Second, there is little in the ministry of Jesus, to suggest that Jesus adopted any adversarial stance towards prostitutes, hierarchical relationships of sexual dependency and perhaps other kinds of sexual sin. Indeed, Jesus was famed for consorting with prostitutes, forgiving of the woman caught in adultery, and well disposed to the 'boy' of the Centurion that needed healing (*Luke* 7:1–10; *John* 8: 1–11). No one is suggesting that Jesus condones sin or is even permissive of profligate sexual lifestyles. What is being suggested instead is that Jesus worked with the social construction of reality of his day during his ministry, in order to present the credentials of the radical inclusion of the Kingdom of God, where we note the prostitutes and sinners were given both priority and privilege (*Matthew* 21:31).

In so doing, Jesus is simply recognising what we would (hopefully) recognise today – that few people opt to become prostitutes or sex-workers as a career of choice, and that those who are used and groomed for such sexual purposes – as many eunuchs were – had not chosen this either. They could not be free and were not

able to turn away from their roles and livelihoods without cost to themselves, and possibly losing their life in the process of turning away from what they were made for and paid for. They were trapped in their bodies that were set aside for functions they may not have chosen freely, and their grooming from an early age would mean that by the time they became aware of the opportunities afforded to others, those options would be completely closed off to them. Their power and identity therefore lay only in making their ambivalence and specious sexual nature work for them as best they could, and satisfying their employer or owner. Yet being trapped in the horns of this dilemma did not make such people unacceptable to the inclusive Kingdom of God, expressed in Jesus' embodied love.

Third, there is something about the eunuch's inherent social and moral value that transcends any interest we might have in the sexual proclivities of an Ethiopian court – with the hierarchies that existed within the harem. The Ethiopian eunuch is a 'foreigner' many times over. He can read *Isaiah*, but even with his learning, he cannot enter the assembly of the Lord. He cannot become Jewish. He cannot place himself in a faith community that might preserve his life in old age. Even though he is returning from Jerusalem, where he went to worship, it is unlikely he could have entered the inner courts of a synagogue or the temple. The likes of Jairus were paid to police those the boundaries of places of worship and keep out the ritually tainted or unclean (see *Luke* 8:40–42, etc., where Jairus is the patron or synagogue ruler), such that those excluded by Levitical law could not gain entry.

On this lonely journey back from Jerusalem to Gaza, the Ethiopian realises he will most likely be discarded at death, and the memory of him will be lost forever. He knows that his future is likely to end in being despised, rejected and cast out. So, his current reliability and dependability (perhaps now primarily one of financial acumen?) are directly linked to his inevitable sexual decline (i.e., age, beauty and performance) and his disposability. And here is the irony. For Jesus too, is reliable, dependable and also becomes disposable. The one for the outcasts becomes the one cast out. The beauty of the *Luke-Acts* account is that the alienation and stigmatisation that so pains the Ethiopian is something that Jesus himself has already participated and shared in. The Suffering Servant (Jesus) can draw to himself this other suffering servant (the eunuch). Neither escape their fate, or so it seems.

Fourth, Greer's modelling of the female eunuch throws some questions back to the churches in relation to normativity, exclusion and inclusion. Questions of gender, sexuality, equality, difference and more holistic forms of ecclesial incorporation now surface with some prescience. How does the church welcome those who don't fit the typology of adult white male normativity? What does *Isaiah* 56 have to say to those of different classes, (dis-)ability, ethnicity, sexuality and culture? We must note that even in the explanation of *Isaiah* 53 by Philip, the Ethiopian could hardly come to a full and extensive Christian faith. (Yet that is what faith is: 'becoming a Christian' is always in the present and future tense, not just the past). The idea that Philip's evangelising and baptism of the unnamed eunuch is somehow a single complete action needs to be tempered by a proper pneumatology and missiology.

The message of the *Luke-Acts* story – in the hands of many preachers – is that this is how the gospel first gets to Africa. However, pneumatology and missiology – even in the further accounts that *Luke-Acts* relays – shows that the Holy Spirit works from beyond the church too, and ‘queers’ it from without: a serious case of intentional holy disruption visited upon the church?. The gospel programme of radical inclusion is not something the apostles so much drove, as had to learn to recognise and accept as they encountered the Holy Spirit ahead of them. This was Peter’s lesson with the heavenly vision of forbidden non-kosher food, as it was Paul’s struggle with some early Christians who tried to insist on circumcision (see *Acts* 10: 9-17, *Acts* 15 & *1 Corinthians* 7:18-20). The story of gentile inclusion – and of pagans finding Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit – was something the church was asked to see and accept rather than necessarily originate. The Spirit was beyond the reach of the apostles: they were sent out to encounter it in others, who had already received it.

Fifth, the sub-title of this essay could just as easily have been “lost (and found?) in translation”. As indicated, the text that the eunuch is reading from is already derivative. It is probably Greek, but could come from the *Peshitta* Old Testament. The earliest parts in Old Syriac are thought to have been translated from some of the extant Hebrew or Aramaic texts by Jewish Christians, although the *Peshitta* was later revised according to Greek textual principles. This may account for the space that some slight errors in translation from the original Hebrew created for the eunuch to elide his own life and experience – and potential fate – with that of the suffering servant that *Luke* and Philip want to draw our attention to, namely Jesus.

Thus, ‘lamb’ and ‘sheep’ references are switched in the version the eunuch reads, and ‘contemporaries’ slips to ‘generation’, which makes the lack of descendants much more personal and painful for the eunuch. Jesus, the ‘Suffering Servant’, has no descendants either. There is something in this that modern readers may sense too. I have used the term ‘grooming’ previously, and one way of regarding eunuchs is to see them as victims of normalised sexual abuse. Seeing Jesus as a victim is not difficult, but more recently some scholars have taken an interest in the torment of crucifixion, and the elements of sexual abuse that usually went with it: the nakedness, whipping and asphyxiation, with blood, sweat and tears. The Ethiopian would have a keen sense of such victimhood. The stage is set, therefore, for Philip to explain the implicit links between the life of Jesus and its fruits (spiritual descendants – not born of the flesh, but of the Spirit) and the similar potential for a eunuch.

Sixth, I recognise that the *Luke-Acts* account, and the tentative interpretation offered here, is work-in-progress. We have to understand *Luke-Acts* as permission for this emerging post-Jewish Christian faith to ‘become’ ‘foreign’ and ‘other’. The early Christians worshipped in synagogues and one another’s homes. Christianity began by being ‘queered’. Here I think we must at least acknowledge that the account in *Acts* is permission-giving in new ways. It might, for example, have something to say about race and ethnicity, and movements such as Black Lives Matter. The transgender status of the eunuch, and the lack of censure or negative comment in

conversion and baptism must surely be apparent. We can surely see that this eunuch carries considerable shame, stigma and existential anguish about his personhood and identity, such that he wonders if he will matter to God, any community of faith, or indeed any person at all after he has died.

I guess you could say he has some issues with low self-esteem. But as a eunuch, and despite his multilingual talents and accountancy acumen, he is mournful. He finds in Jesus – the ‘Suffering Servant’ of Isaiah – a fellow sufferer: one in whom has compassion *for* him. *Com-compassion* literally means to ‘suffer with’, and this is what the eunuch identifies in Jesus. Someone who is weak with the weak; vulnerable with the vulnerable; hated with the sinners, outcasts and prostitutes; stigmatised by the powerful and self-righteous; a victim with the victims; unfairly tried and judged, and afforded no defence before being humiliated, tortured, violated and executed. Yes, Jesus is in all of these. But God does not forget his faithful ones. God does not abandon us. God keeps us. And finally, God has raised up new generations of followers through the birth, death and resurrection of his Son, born of a woman.

Seventh, the vision of *Isaiah* 56 dislocates, dismantles and ultimately destroys any monopoly imposed on monotheism. All are welcome, and in Christ, there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, barren or fecund. The new assembly of the Lord imposes no bar on eunuchs, and they can inherit and pass on the same riches of God’s grace to their spiritual descendants. In this, such is the love of God that even in mistranslations, missteps and mistakes – and we can all be the flawed vessels of such – Jesus comes bearing the offer of mercy, grace and love to strangers, aliens and foreigners; those diseased, disfigured and orphaned; prostitutes, sinners, widows, stigmatised, demonised and the marginalised. God is *for* them all. The old tribalism was now subverted by a faith for multicultural regionalism (i.e., Israel, but also Samaria, Idumea, Gerasene, etc.), and a movement geared towards true internationalism and globalisation.

Philip, let us not forget, was out and about in Samaria before he met the eunuch. Philip’s journeys take him to Sebaste (a gentile city) where traditional Jews (who usually loathed Samaritans) refused to go. Sebaste was where, during persecution, and following the death of Stephen (*Acts* 7), the Greek-speaking believers fled to and sought refuge. Philip was a Greek-speaking apostle. He travelled to Gaza too – a Philistine city – with Jerusalem to the north, and the roads to Egypt and (biblical, not modern) Ethiopia accessible to the south. Philip is amongst the pagans and the gentiles. Jesus spent time in gentile places and ‘found’ faith in the people who dwelt in there. Philip finds the same. So with something being ‘lost in translation’, and with reference to our fifth point, we are also in a position to now accept that the Holy Spirit can carry conviction and grant grace, even when technically, the original

words and meanings are either lost, unavailable, or misunderstood by their hearers or readers. I find it quite striking that this conversion of a foreigner hinges, technically, on the misreading of a text, inadequate or unclear translation, and some misunderstandings. Yet the preacher or interpreter – Philip in this case – has still managed to convey the essentials and core gospel that represent Jesus' *kin-dom* project (NB: on this, see Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, Orbis, 1996).

Eighth, the *Luke-Acts* account does not give carte blanche for the inclusion of everyone and everything in the church. But the story, like the ministry of Jesus, recognises that some people have been 'made' eunuchs, and some 'born' that way. There is something here, I suspect, about the nature-nurture axis, and what it is that produces our normativity in relation to sexuality, and equally, what societies come to regard as taboo or deviant. The lesson from *Acts* 8 is that people may be quite powerless to alter what they are, and they may find themselves on the wrong end of social, moral, temporal and cultural projections that label them as deviants. It matters not whether they were born this way or that; or have been made this way by their circumstances or upbringing. They must be loved as they are. Thus "we hate the sin, but not the sinner" is all very well, but we just don't find such neat, glib distinctions in the gospels. For eunuchs, their form and function was particular to their time, and I daresay we can stretch our imaginations just a little, and find some comparable modern equivalents, not least sex workers, prostitutes and those groomed for such service from an early age.

Here I think we are on safer, if rather more uncomfortable ground. Can we see this eunuch as a victim of sexual abuse? I think we can. He does not have the liberty to alter his sexuality and physicality, and on the reasonable assumption that his status as a eunuch was imposed and not chosen, he is a victim of sexual abuse many, many times over. Not only in the manner of things he might have been made to engage in or perform, but also in what has been denied to him. He has been made to live in his body quite differently from male or female normativity. He has been 'queered' – perhaps from a young age – and almost certainly genitally disfigured in some manner. We can only guess at the sexual acts that he may have been compelled to engage in, but I doubt these will have been consensual. He is living under a social-scared canopy of stigma that, for eunuchs, runs from ancient times to the present. This is what Erving Goffman had in mind in his excellent study, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Prentice-Hall, 1963). The dwarf, disfigured, blind, homosexual, transgender, ex-mental patient, the member of a racial or religious minority and the eunuch all share one characteristic: they are all socially 'abnormal', and therefore in danger of being considered less than human. This is pretty well precisely what *Acts* 8 is driving at. Too often ordinary people react to the apparently 'sub-normal' person or group by rejecting them. Or then again by faux-over-hearty

acceptance, or by plain embarrassment. Normativity can rarely see itself, and its main concern is to identify the ‘other’: an individual or group ‘deviance’ that is made to hide or shirk in plain sight. It is rare to find any community that sees all people as intrinsically and extrinsically ‘whole’. Thus, the eunuch does not just simply find faith in Jesus’ divinity; he grasps the fellowship, acceptance, equality and humanity that Philip has shown. So we can perhaps say Philip had a “straight eye for the queer guy”, and welcomed him into the church through *immediate* baptism as a human being of equal dignity to all other converts.

Ninth, an adult understanding of baptism makes adult baptism not only possible for the eunuch, but essential and radical. Yet rather as Paul counselled slaves, they may not be able to change their day-to-day drudgery and the demands made upon them, and just have to continue being good, reliable and obedient workers, even as Christians. That meant they would still have no actual human rights to refuse the demands of their owners, and that those would have frequently included sexual ultimatums, abuse, violations and violence. This could all be accompanied by physical and verbal abuse. Such is the lot of the slave. With the recent recovery of African-American histories, and in liberation, ethnic, feminist, political and other theologies of resistance and revolution, Christians have had to come to terms with their collusion in privileging white-male-normativity.

Thankfully, you may never have seen a copy of the *Slave Bible*, which was an edition (Authorised Version) of the Bible specifically published for educating slaves in the early 19th century. Its full title was *Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands*. Such bibles had all references to freedom and escape from slavery excised, while passages encouraging obedience and submission were emphasized. It was a kind of racist *Reader’s Digest* version of scripture – where the editors served up just ten percent of the Old Testament and around half of the New Testament. Excluded passages were *Galatians* 3: 28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free...”), which was thought to have potential for inciting rebellion. Passages such *Ephesians* 6: 5 (“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ”) were naturally retained.

In truth, we are still in the age of resistance, and the revolutions required have barely begun. We have only briefly mentioned the *Mujerista* programme of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, which outlines a Hispanic women’s liberation theology resisting domestic violence and sexual abuse, and empowering women in their struggles. The representations in Latin American art of Christa – a crucified woman – have become powerful symbols of incarnational suffering solidarity in ongoing campaigns of resistance. The targeting, sexual abuse, deliberate humiliation and physical emasculation of black men in early-mid twentieth century America, then with tarring and feathering often preceding their eventual castration before the lynching, and all set as a spectacle before the prurient curiosity of large gatherings of white crowds, is

well chronicled. You could even buy souvenir postcards of such events. We might remember that many of those targeted to die were condemned before they could be tried and judged, even though it was to be an all-white-male jury. I think of the words uttered before Jesus in the court of Caiaphas: “what need have we of witnesses?” (*Matthew* 26: 65). Just as black men were dragged from the county jail and lynched before their trial or verdict, so with Jesus: condemned to death before the defence or prosecution has really presented their case. Why bother with justice or a court of law?

Tenth, I confess, you might find this final reflection rather difficult. Brace yourself. I think we have to learn to see in Jesus someone who is a victim of abuse, and by this, I include sexual abuse, taunting, shaming and humiliation. We know that Jesus was stripped, whipped, scourged and mocked. You may find his silence eloquent, powerful or puzzling. Yet I think in our age, his silence echoes differently and cries across two thousand years of sexual, marital, emotional and physical abuse. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements teach us that victims have been oppressed and pushed into silence. Their voices and cries are not heard, and the bystanders – the many – do nothing to rein in the cruelty of the few. We forget that the groups of men hitting, striking, beating spitting at and abusing Jesus blindfolded him and taunted him. They kept their deeds, anonymous and in the dark. They knew what they were doing was abusive, but unseen in the dark, there could be no witnesses.

This was all part of the shame-culture invested in humiliating prisoners and condemned people. Then, as now. I only have to think of the Abu Ghraib detainee who told investigators that he heard an Iraqi teenage boy screaming, and saw an Army translator raping him, while a female soldier took pictures. How was this possible? The answer is the victims had been rendered sub-human, and would shortly be extinguished forever. The silence of the victims might have been stoicism, or possibly bravery. More likely, is the utter terror and paralysing fear that is common to all victims of abuse. Speaking out, or resisting, often only makes the abuse and violence worse, so the body shuts down and becomes passive. Just ask anyone who has been raped, sexually abused, physically assaulted or perpetually bullied. Often, the silence signals submission, and this surrender can rob the abuser of agency. By being utterly passive and submissive, the target of aggression becomes smaller. Survivors of domestic and sexual abuse have learned that speaking out during the perpetration of cruelty, battering and beating can make the violence worse. You might want to read *Isaiah* 53: 7-8 again at this point. Whether in Greek, Hebrew or English, the silence now says something else, does it not?

Moreover, as we now know from discovered first-hand written accounts of crucifixions two thousand years ago, the victim might be forced to watch their family or friends brutalised, sodomised, beaten or raped whilst they, the powerless, were

compelled to watch. The privilege of the state was the power of terrorisation. Further shaming, mutilation and offences could be committed against a person who was pinned and lashed to a gibbet. Witnesses might just be forced to watch the violent and degrading impalement of a victim's orifices whilst still alive. Perhaps you can now understand why the disciples had their very good reasons to be scarce at the foot of the cross. Getting caught up in a crucifixion – as a friend or family of the victim – could be an extremely dangerous business for witnesses.

Shame culture was the deliberate stripping of a man's dignity and honour. Victims of crucifixion were often pinned up naked, with their slow death through asphyxiation producing their own perverse offshoot: the sexual spectacle of a man writhing, gasping for breath, whilst every soft organ and muscle swelled bulbous-purple with blood. Crucifixion-induced shame rendered the victim unable to exercise any self-control of their muscles, motions or reflexes in their body, and the sadistic cruelty this involved only added to the public humiliation. So maybe now you can understand why the soldiers laughed at the foot of the cross, and gamed with dice, banter, torments and insults, and casually inflicting a little more pain. The sexual violation of each victim was a crucial component in their subjugation and eventual extinction. One cannot see the Ethiopian eunuch, the 'Suffering Servant' of *Isaiah* and Jesus as anything other than thickly connected. The passive-receptive axis of their abuse and their silencing in the face of cruelty, is located in the stripping of all their human dignity and honour through deliberate acts that perpetrated multiple forms of humiliation and degradation.

Conclusions Un-Queered:

So, what can we say? The good news of the gospel for the Ethiopian eunuch was that by being baptised, he became part of a new community and family, which did not exclude him for who he was, what had made him that way, or even what he might have to enjoy or endure when he wasn't reading *Isaiah* in his spare time, or doing the accounts for his Candace (or ruler-owner). This new assembly of the Lord would welcome him as an equal member – one that granted him equal human dignity without qualification or quibble. He was just like one of the many foreigners and strangers that made up this new assembly we now know as 'church' – and it would give him a stake in the present and future, in which he would indeed have many descendants. But his descendants would not be born of flesh and blood or the will of normative white adult males.

Then there is "the silence of the lambs" to consider. I think of Abu Ghraib torture survivors waiting years for their day in court. Or, incalculable numbers of victims of abuse, rape, torture and violence, for whom there seems no voice. Just silence. Where is their justice? We too are crucified with Christ. Yes, #WeToo. But it is not the end, is it? As Jesus says, our descendants will be born of the Spirit (*John* 1: 13).

Likewise, the eunuch's lineage would last, giving birth to the Ethiopian church. It is into that same Spirit that we are all baptised; with the eunuchs, martyrs, silenced, victimised and abused. So when you are next called upon to witness or preside at an adult baptism, remember the eunuch and learn from him. And from Philip too, who, prompted by the Holy Spirit, had "a straight eye for the queer guy". If we must become more adult about baptism, let us pray and ponder over who and what this baptism is for, and what the Spirit is now trying to say to us today. To those who have ears, let them hear (*Matthew* 13: 9-17).

Selected Further Reading:

There are a number of books and commentaries this essay has drawn upon. My interest in this field was triggered by conversations with the Revd. Canon Dr. Emma Percy. Her 'Can a eunuch be baptised?' (*Theology*, 2016) has been formative in some of the thinking that enabled the gestation of this essay. Earlier work by David Tombs originated a highly illuminating collection of essays in the edited *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse* (SCM Press, 2021), with excellent contribution from David Tombs, Michael Trainor, Mitzi Smith, Gerald West and Rachel Starr. I also warmly commend:

- Biss, Eula. *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017.
- Boswell, John. *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, Random House, 1994.
- Bray, Alan. *The Friend*, University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Childs, Brevard. *Isaiah: A Commentary*, Fortress Press, 2001.
- Cornwall, Susannah. "“State of Mind” versus “Concrete Set of Facts”: The Contrasting of Transgender and Intersex in Church Documents on Sexuality', *Theology and Sexuality*, vol. 15, no. 1, September 2009, pp. 7–28.
- Cornwall, Susannah. "“What Religion or Reason Could Drive a Man to Forsake his Lover?”", *Relational Theology, Co-creativity and the Intersexed Body of Christ*, (eds.) Lisa Isherwood & Elaine Bellchambers, SCM Press, 2010, pp. 33–51.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*, MacGibbon & Kee, 1970.
- Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *Mujerista Theology*, Orbis, 1996.
- Jones, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Fortress Press, 2000.
- Kuefler, Mathew. *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Kuefler, Mathew (ed.). *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

- Riley, Patrick. *Civilizing Sex: On Chastity and the Common Good*, T&T Clark, 2000.
- Percy, Emma. ‘Can a eunuch be baptised?’: Insights for Gender Inclusion from *Acts* Chapter 8, *Theology*, 2016, vol. 119(5) pp. 327–334.
- Percy, Emma. ‘Queer Eye for a Fearful Church’ at www.modernchurch.org.uk pub: (23-03-21).
- Ringrose, Kathryn. *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*, University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Stevenson, Walter. ‘The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 5, No. 4 (Apr., 1995), pp. 495-511.
- Sunstein, Cass. *This Is Not Normal: The Politics of Everyday Expectations*, Yale University Press, 2021.
- Sunstein, Cass. *Conformity*, New York University Press, 2019.
- Tombs, David, Reeves, Jayne. & Figueroa, Rocio. (eds). *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, SCM Press, 2021.

Selected Illustrations Referenced in the Article:

‘Strange Fish’ (Christa), Laurie Lewis, 1995 (top left, personal copy of author)

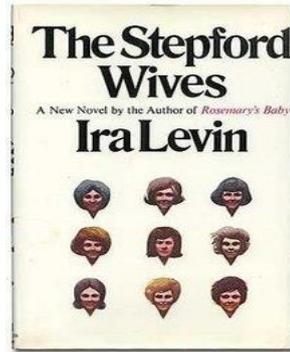
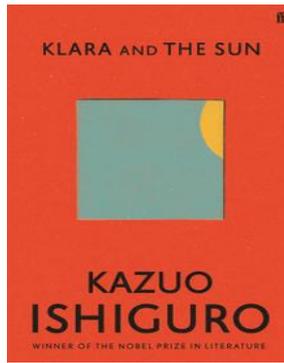
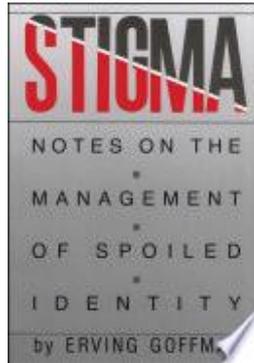












"TAKEN FROM DEATH" LYNCHING AT RUSSELLVILLE, LOGAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY, JULY 31, 1908. HANGED ON THE OLD PROCTOR LYNCHING TREE. THIS IS A MULTIPLE CEDAR TREE AND THESE FOUR MAKE A TOTAL OF NINE MEN LYNCHED ON THIS TREE, SOME WERE WHITE MEN. THIS TREE IS AN OLD LAND MARK AND WAS AN OLD CEDAR TREE, EVEN IN THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE OLDEST SETTLERS. RUSSELLVILLE IS ONE OF THE PIONEER TOWNS OF KENTUCKY AND WAS SETTLED IN A CAME BIRNIE. THIS IS AN EXACT PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN AT DAWN AUG. 1, '08. COPYRIGHTED 1901 BY JACK MORTON. SALESMAN, STARLAW BUILDING.

