

Manningham Uniting Church Fellowship@10

28th April 2024: Easter 5

Theme: God is not White

Text: Acts 8:26-40

Introduction

Is God white? You know the answer. Right?

According to Rev Dr Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *“When Western Christians think about God, the default image that comes to mind is usually white and male.”*

*In her latest book, **When God Became White: Dismantling Whiteness for a More Just Christianity**. She says: “Christianity is rooted in the ancient Near East among people of darker skin. But over time, European Christians cast Jesus in their own image, with art that imagined a fair-skinned Saviour in the style of imperial rulers.”*

Do you know before the 17th century, people did not think of themselves as belonging to something called the white race. But once the idea was invented, it quickly began to reshape the modern world.

By the middle of the 20th century, the presumption that a race of people called white were superior to all others had supplied the central justification not just for the transatlantic slave trade but also for the near-total extinction of Indians in North America; for Belgian atrocities in Congo; for the bloody colonisation of India, east Africa and Australia by Britain; for the equally bloody colonisation of north and west Africa and south-east Asia by France; for the deployment of the Final Solution in Nazi Germany; and for the apartheid state in South Africa.

Believe me, those are merely the most extreme examples. Alongside those murdered, raped and enslaved in the name of whiteness, the total number of whom run at least to nine figures, are an almost unthinkable number of people whose lives were shortened, constrained, antagonised and insulted on a daily basis.

In short, whiteness is an invented concept that has been used as a tool of oppression.

Let us pray...

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?”

On this question hinges the entire Acts 8:26-40 passage. The Eunuch’s question isn’t really about baptism, is it? It's a question about inclusion.

Can I become a part of your community? Will I be treated as an equal?

You would think the answer would be straightforward for Phillip. But unfortunately, it wasn't, because the person asking was a eunuch.

As you know our story begins when an angel directs the apostle Philip to go south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On this road in the desert Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip has encountered a black African man in the desert. Now that in and of itself is remarkable. I don’t know about you, but this strikes me as an odd way to introduce someone; no name, just an Ethiopian eunuch. The author must have thought it was important because he tells us not once but five times that the Ethiopian was a eunuch.

In the ancient world, the term eunuch was a broad one, encompassing people who had been castrated, but also intersex people, and other kinds of gender nonconformity.

Socially, eunuchs existed in a grey area. They were treated as not being ‘real’ men as they could not fit in with Roman ideals of masculinity. This is why they were allowed to access many women-only spaces.

But on the other hand, they were not treated as women either. They existed in a place outside a neat gender binary. Believe it or not this in-betweenness could be a real advantage, opening up jobs and opportunities to advance in society (like being a trusted confidant of the Queen of Ethiopia). Eunuchs were popular employees with queens, who didn’t want anybody casting aspersions on any of their offspring.

Now, while rulers entrusted eunuchs with certain key positions, they were pretty much shunned by the rest of society. They were outcasts. They faced stigmatisation and discrimination by people who found their existence uncomfortable.

We even see this recorded in the Old Testament Law: Deuteronomy 23 prevented eunuchs from even setting foot in the Temple. Eunuchs weren’t welcome in God’s house. And not only is the person asking the question a eunuch, he is a eunuch from Ethiopia.

To inhabitants of the Roman Empire, Ethiopia was the edge of the known world, a land far from Israel. I think the Eunuch wouldn’t be accepted in many of our churches today.

Mind you, according to the Bible, none of us are welcome here in God's house. The Bible forbids the wearing of more than one type of cloth at the same time.

According to Leviticus 21:20, anyone who is wearing glasses shouldn't be here either, because one should not approach the altar of the Lord if they have a defect in their sight.

Did you know that it is an abomination before God to work on the Sabbath and according to Exodus 35: 2 anybody who works on the Sabbath should be put to death?

Those of you who cut your grass yesterday, which according to the Bible is the Sabbath, those of you who worked around the house yesterday, well you should be rounded up and executed.

Any women out there who are having their period, according to the Bible you ought to leave right now, because you are unclean and you're making the rest of us unclean as well.

And you men needn't bother smiling, because any of you who have had your hair trimmed, including the hair around your temples ought to know that according to Leviticus 19:27 this is strictly forbidden. As far as I can tell, the penalty for those haircuts of yours is death by stoning.

It's very likely that the religious authorities in Jerusalem at the turn of the first century won't be too welcoming of a Black African, gentile, Ethiopian, and Eunuch. I am sure he wasn't welcome in the Temple. So, he left Jerusalem and was on his way back home, riding in his chariot, reading aloud.

What is remarkable is that the Ethiopian eunuch had to read at all or that he knew how to read. This Ethiopian eunuch must have been fairly well off because he was reading from the book of the Prophet of Isaiah and one of those scrolls would set you back quite a bit at the turn of the first century. So, we know he is a man of some wealth and importance, because not only can he afford his own scroll, but he knows how to read it, not in his native tongue, but in Greek.

Can I become a part of your community?

Phillip answered with his actions. He brought the Ethiopian eunuch to water and baptised them on the spot. He welcomed them into his community as an equal, a sibling in Christ. The Ethiopian is the first recorded convert to Christianity and was a small taste of how radically inclusive the early church would be, including people of all castes, ethnic backgrounds, and social groups.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”(Galatians 3:28)

For people who have been kept on the margins, passages like these show that there is a place for us in God's family. And not begrudging acceptance, but a place of honour as beloved children of God. The passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading was about the Suffering Servant of God, who was “cut off” from the people of God. It was no accident he was reading this.

Surely, he was trying to figure out why he himself was being cut off from the people of God because if he was reading this passage, he likely also read the neighbouring passages where God promised to bless all those who had been excluded and cut off because they were different.

“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.” (Isaiah 56:4-5)

Just imagine how powerful these words were in a time when the whole promise of eternity hinged on sons and daughters, something a eunuch could never have. It was as if Isaiah was speaking directly to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Foreigners and eunuchs were supposed to be welcomed at God’s table! Those who had been excluded were supposed to be included, even though the religious authorities were hung up on the rules that were laid out in Moses’ day.

The Apostle Philip shared the Good News of Jesus with the Ethiopian eunuch. This Suffering Servant the eunuch was reading about was someone he could identify with. This was a Messiah who had been cut off, just like him.

Suddenly the labels that prevented this man from full inclusion in the assembly of the people of God are overcome...and not even the arid desert can defeat them, for suddenly there is some water and the man asks Philip: ***“What is to prevent me from being baptised?”***

The Ethiopian commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water and Philip baptized him. Philip just hops out of the chariot,

and jumps into the water and boldly baptizes this inquiring, scripture-reading, Christ-seeking eunuch.

Maybe, just maybe we can learn something from Philip's radical act.

Maybe instead of talking and arguing among ourselves for years and years, we ought to just jump into the water and trust the Spirit to take care of the details.

According to the story, when they came up out of the water, the Spirit snatched Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

On his way rejoicing, this unnamed Ethiopian eunuch, became the first Christian in Africa, and is the patron saint of Ethiopia. Incidentally, the Christian church in Ethiopia was in existence long before the church in Rome. Ethiopia has one the longest-standing Christian communities in the world. Today, most of the people of Ethiopia are Christians.

Centuries of Christianity resulted from Philip's unlikely mission to an Ethiopian eunuch, through the Spirit's call to cross the traditional boundaries that existed. Those traditional boundaries could be supported by quoting scripture and yet the Spirit prompted Philip to cross those boundaries anyway.

In the church, we have helped to build and also to tear down some of the strongest boundaries of all.

Some boundaries we have begun to break down, through the Spirit's help, and others we have only strengthened by our action or our inaction.

In the name of Christ, Christians have justified slavery and Christians have fought against slavery.

In the name of Christ, Christians have oppressed women and Christians have fought against the oppression of women.

In the name of Christ, Christians have condemned gay and lesbian people and Christians have affirmed gay and lesbian people.

The Gospel is not a respecter of boundaries. It doesn't matter what the religious establishment says, no one is cut off from God's love.

Not surprising this passage has resonated with many LGBTQ+ Christians, transgender people especially. To be clear, being a eunuch and being transgender is very different, and we cannot impose modern identities onto people who live in a very different society. But trans people know what it's like to not fit into society's ideas of what it means to be a man or woman. And they certainly know what it's like to experience shame and stigma from a society that finds their existence uncomfortable.

God is not white and also not a man. Again, you know that. However, whiteness is considered the norm of society. *Whiteness* and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared.

I wonder whether it ever has occurred to you that the concept of 'whiteness' being superior and different has been deeply rooted in our minds from an early age.

We all have sung the all-time favourite song:

Jesus loves the little children

All the children of the world

Red and yellow, black and white

They are precious in His sight

Jesus loves the little children of the world.

I am confident that most of us here insist that everyone is equal in God's sight, and yet many live as if whiteness is the norm, that non-white people need to think, speak, and behave like whites which leads to white supremacy culture.

What is to prevent me from being baptised? Can I become a part of your community?

I hope and pray that MUC will be a house of prayer for all people, for God is love and there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

This dear sisters and brothers is the gospel of our God.

So, what in the world are we waiting for, for Christ's sake, let's jump into the water so that we too can be on our way rejoicing.

Amen.