

## **Acts 8<sup>26—40</sup>; John 15<sup>1—8</sup>**

28<sup>th</sup> April 2024

*Ballarat cathedral*

We have just heard a little story set in a place which, until the last few months, most of us would never have heard of: the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Fortunately, this story is much happier than the stories in the media today about events on that road.

It is a pleasant little anecdote about a completely unexpected meeting of Philip, a Christian missionary, with a total stranger. "Hey, you'll never guess what happened to me on the road to Gaza." The stranger was a highly-placed official from the Ethiopian royal court. He was sitting in his chariot, reading a passage from the book of Isaiah. (Philip overheard, because reading in those days was always done aloud.) The two of them discuss the passage; Philip explains its meaning, and his new acquaintance is so impressed that he asks to be baptised into the Christian faith. Then each goes his own way: they never meet again.

It's a mildly interesting story with a happy ending, but why is it in the Bible? It is included in the book of Acts, which is the second volume of Luke's history of Christianity. The first volume is his gospel, recording the life of Jesus and its effect on many people, particularly his disciples. In volume 2 he describes how these disciples spread the message of Jesus throughout the surrounding countries, and thereby completely transformed the course of world history.

So where does this incident with the Ethiopian fit in? Apart from its minor historical interest, is there anything we can learn from it? I think there is. Immediately after this story comes another, much more familiar one, which is also about an important man deciding to become a Christian. Saul, a fanatically religious Jew, was on his way to Damascus to arrest any Christians he could find, and put them in prison. We all know what happened just before he got to Damascus: he heard Jesus call him, and his life was totally turned

around. This has become a well-known symbol of a sudden insight that changes life. People occasionally refer to “having a Damascus Road experience”.

By putting these two conversion stories together, Luke is making a significant point in his history book. He has been describing how Christianity was spreading like wildfire, and churches were springing up all over the known world. And now he gives us a crucial glimpse of how this worked on a personal level. We are shown how the dynamic core of the gospel message is that lives are changed. In other words, people are converted. And these two highly-placed individuals—the Ethiopian and Saul—are personal examples of what was happening to hundreds of people in dozens of countries. They are everlasting examples of what happens when anyone comes to faith, including you and me.

How and why did you become a Christian? It is very worthwhile from time to time to remind ourselves of how we found faith. Everyone's experience is different. For some, it is a long, stop-start process over years; for others it comes in a dramatic moment in which they meet the risen Christ. In my own case, it seems almost to be a cyclical process. Having been brought up in a Christian family, in one sense I seem to have been a Christian all my life. In another sense, I must confess, there have been periods which I felt virtually an unbeliever; then I returned to the Lord, and each time it almost seemed to be a new conversion.

Whatever your particular experience was, Luke's conversion stories remind us of a couple of vital and central truths about coming to faith. One is that new life in Jesus is open to everyone, regardless of race, culture, or religion. The Ethiopian was a man of status in his own country, an official in the royal court. He was interested in the Jewish faith. He had been to Jerusalem to participate in worship, and he was reading the Jewish Scriptures on his way back. But he would have been viewed by the Jews as a complete outsider. He was a black African, from what they saw as the wild ends of the earth; as a eunuch, he was not permitted in the temple. Yet as he heard about Jesus from Philip, he realised this was the one he had been searching for. When Saul, who

hated Christianity and persecuted Christians, heard Jesus' voice, he realised what his life really was about.

When we reflect on our own faith, we can be utterly reassured that Jesus accepts us, as we are. There is nothing about me—my social standing, my culture, the terrible things I have done in my life—there is nothing that, in the words of Paul, can separate us from the love of Christ.

Luke also reminds us that conversion, from start to finish, is the work of God. The reason Philip took the Gaza road is that he was directed by God. When the Ethiopian asks about the Bible reading, God prompts Philip to tell him the gospel story. Saul, also travelling down a road, is stopped in his tracks by the voice from heaven. Luke makes it clear that, as Jesus said to a crowd of people who question his authority,

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.

The word translated as “drawn” means “dragged in”: it is the term used to describe the action of fishermen when they dragged their nets full of fish into their boats. God drags us in in order to change our lives. I am sure many of us can relate to this. Reflect and remember for a moment: can you see how God dragged you in?

*Let us pray.*

*Heavenly Father, we praise you for our faith. We thank you that through Jesus we have found life; that there is nothing that separates us from his love. We reflect on how you drew us in to become members of His family. May we be willing, through your grace, to become part of the process by which you draw in others and Jesus changes their lives.*

*We ask in Jesus' precious name. Amen*