

WHO CAN CONTROL GOD'S GRACE?¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2 May 2021

This morning, I want to talk to you about eunuchs. I confess that this is not a common discussion from the pulpit of this church, or, I expect, from many other churches. Nevertheless, this morning's reading from Acts has delivered us a eunuch and we should give him place of honour.

Our story starts with Philip. The New Testament has three Philips. We can ignore the Philip who was the first husband of Herod's wife, Herodias.² Apart from anything else, he was dead. The second Philip is listed in each of the four gospels as one of the twelve apostles. He was the one who introduced Nathaniel to Jesus.³ He, with Andrew, took the Greek enquirers to Jesus during Holy Week.⁴ The Philip of our story is not the apostle. Rather, he is the third Philip, known as Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven deacons, including the first martyr, Stephen, appointed to care for the poor in the early Jerusalem church.⁵ Chapter 8 of Acts is devoted to Philip's story and significance. He also appears later in Acts, living in Caesarea, which is where he went at the end of today's reading, and married with four daughters who had the gift of prophecy.⁶ In this latter part of chapter 8, Philip thought that he should go down the desert road to Gaza. Acts describes this as a message from an angel. On his way, he came across the stationary carriage of a person described as "an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury."

Ethiopia is not the modern country of that name but an area of southern Egypt and northern Sudan. It was a long way off and an Ethiopian may represent someone from the end of the earth, to which the disciples were commanded to take the gospel. Our eunuch is a high official in the Ethiopian court, what might be called a chamberlain. Eunuchs were frequently used for such important work. Their duties did not compete with family or other associations. They could go anywhere in the court, even those parts reserved for the women. Candace is a title, not a name, and refers to the dowager queen, who was the real power in the kingdom. The road to Gaza was on our eunuch's way home.

When we read to ourselves, we do so silently. That was not the practice in the ancient world. The eunuch is reading aloud, which is why Philip can hear him and recognise the text. It was Isaiah 53, and the account quotes verses 7 and 8, which are very familiar to us from our Holy Week and Easter lectionary.

When he sees Philip, the eunuch asks him a question, giving Philip an opening to tell him about Jesus, whereupon the eunuch asks to be baptised, which Philip does. This apparently simple story hides a number of quite complex matters.

The eunuch was in a difficult position. The story tells us that he had been to Jerusalem to worship. He was sufficiently attracted to the Jewish faith to make a long and expensive journey

¹ Readings: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:26-32; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

² Matthew 14:3, Mark 6:17. Herodias was the mother of Salome. John the Baptist objected to Herod's marrying his dead brother's widow, which led to his death.

³ John 1:43-46

⁴ John 12:20-22

⁵ Acts 6:5

⁶ Acts 21:7-9

and to obtain a costly, handwritten copy of the Hebrew scriptures for himself. Yet, however much he might desire to become a Jew, he was forever banned. Deuteronomy 23:1 makes it clear that no man with damaged genitals could be admitted to “the assembly of the Lord”.⁷

Earlier in chapter 8, Philip had preached to some Samaritans who believed and were baptised by him.⁸ Samaritans were likewise outcasts from Judaism. These two actions of Philip broke the social and ritual barriers that the Christians had inherited from their Jewish forebears, bringing into the emerging church previously unacceptable people; one group was ethnically unacceptable, the other was unacceptable because they were not physically perfect, that is, they were disabled. Perhaps the story of the suffering servant resonated with our eunuch.

Significantly, our eunuch might have taken some comfort from a later text in Isaiah, which admits eunuchs on the basis of their faith and does not exclude them on the basis of their physicality:

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;⁹

If so, Philip delivered this promise to him. In chapter 8 of Acts, Philip emerges as a significant force in helping the new church to widen its scope beyond being a Jewish sect, which was its alternative future. Although appointed at first to wait at tables and undertake ordinary tasks, Philip was not an ordinary person.

What was the problem with eunuchs? Most of them were slaves who were mutilated to serve the purposes of their masters. They had done nothing wrong. Why could they not become Jewish proselytes? It is at this point that we enter the most divisive issue facing the contemporary church, both here and around the world: sexuality. The problem is that, in the eunuch, we have a man who is unable to fulfil male reproductive functions. The eunuch blurs the male-female division. He cannot fulfil his male duty and reproduce. Neither can he be a woman and bear children. The eunuch was “unnatural” and, therefore, did not fit into the supposed order of creation.¹⁰ The eunuch sits awkwardly in the middle; there were, apparently, no other options. The simple resolution was to cast him out, to imagine that he did not exist. Our story today begins to reimagine what is natural.¹¹

The New Testament has only one other reference to eunuchs.¹² Some Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was legal for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus replies that unchastity was the only

⁷ [\(PDF\) From mutilation to medication: The history of orchidectomy \(researchgate.net\)](#)

⁸ Acts 8:9-14

⁹ Isaiah 56:3-5

¹⁰ Chapter 2, p. 68

¹¹ I acknowledge that this is a complex question. Just how complex can be seen in this introduction to Sean D Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2013. Burke is a Professor of Religion at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and an Episcopalian priest. [Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch \(fortresspress.com\)](#)

¹² Matthew 19:10-12

lawful reason. His disciples, hearing this response, thought that it was exceedingly harsh and asked Jesus whether, in that case, it would be better not to marry. Jesus responds in these words:

‘Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. 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.’

Jesus refers to three categories of eunuchs: those who are born that way; those who are made by others (this is the eunuch in our story); and those who make themselves eunuchs. Historically, commentators have concentrated on the third group. Here, Jesus refers to those who, like himself, and, also Paul, had chosen not to marry but had devoted themselves to ministry. Jesus is not suggesting that anyone take him literally, although it is alleged that the 3rd century theologian, Origen,¹³ did do so.¹⁴

This focus has neglected the first two groups, who have become, if you like, throw away examples. I don’t accept this. You see, in his argument about marriage, Jesus relied on the creation myth, making heterosexual marriage part of God’s design. When he mentions those who cannot, or do not, marry, Jesus refers to persons who do not do what creation says that they should. His comments justify both those who choose not to marry and those who can’t, including those whose incapacity is genetic.

What is important for our purposes this morning is that Jesus himself has begun the reimagining of the natural by recognising and accepting those who are born with an indeterminate or different sexuality and who would otherwise be, and remain, “unnatural”.¹⁵ That his words were unusual may be seen by the warnings that he put both at the beginning and the end of what he said: “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.” “Let anyone accept this who can”.

Why have I taken you on this journey this morning? Let me answer that by referring to something that happened recently in the Catholic Church. The Vatican has a department called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was known historically as the Inquisition. Just before Easter it issued a statement to the effect that the church could not bless same-sex relationships. Some suggest that the statement was designed to rein in Pope Francis, whom many see as moving in that direction. Others suggest that it is a pre-emptive strike against the bishops of the German church who seem about to approve such blessings. Possibly it is both.

¹³ The truth about Origen’s actions is hotly contested by scholars. [Origen - Wikipedia](#).

¹⁴ Nevertheless, the problem was sufficient for the Council of Nicaea (325) to devote its first canon to it: *Canon I*: If anyone in sickness has been subjected by physicians to a surgical operation, or if he has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy; but, if any one in sound health has castrated himself, it behoves that such an one, if [already] enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who wilfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men the Canon admits to the clergy. [CHURCH FATHERS: First Council of Nicaea \(A.D. 325\) \(newadvent.org\)](#)

¹⁵ James V Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality; Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013. Megan K DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2015, p.70ff

The statement has met with considerable criticism. The English Catholic journal, *The Tablet*, invited theologian James Alison to contribute a critical article¹⁶ and also wrote an editorial against it.¹⁷ In this editorial, the journal said: “Fortunately, the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] does not have the power to control God’s grace”. I’ll say that again: “Fortunately, the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] does not have the power to control God’s grace”.

And that is why we have travelled together this morning. You may think that I took the long way around. The reality is that it has taken us all a long way around to discover that neither religious rules, nor accepted customs, nor churches, have the power to control God’s grace. Beware when they try to do so.



Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), *The Baptism of the Eunuch*, 1626, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht¹⁸

¹⁶ James Alison, “How to recognise a tantrum”, *The Tablet*, 27 March 2021, p. 7 [Same-sex blessings and the CDF – how to recognise a tantrum \(thetablet.co.uk\)](https://www.thetablet.co.uk)

¹⁷ *Tablet*, p. 2 [The Tablet - 27 March 2021 \(exacteditions.com\)](https://www.exacteditions.com)

¹⁸ Rembrandt accurately portrays the eunuch as black. Colour or race was not at issue in our story.