

Is there anything to stop me?

Acts 8:26-38

The recent tragedy of an immigrant attacking people with a corrosive substance after being baptised has brought the story we hear in today's reading from Acts into new focus. Let me take you back to the words we heard a few minutes ago: 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?' The answer appears to have been 'nothing'. But it wasn't so before, and it hasn't been so since - which ought to make us sit up. The man concerned was firstly a foreigner, and secondly a eunuch. Ancient Jewish law said that on both counts he should be excluded from worship. Isaiah said that God welcomed both kinds of people - but it is clear that that wasn't accepted by many, from the way foreigners and eunuchs continued to be treated by Jews. So had he been talking about his need to come to God a few years earlier - the answer would have been - No - you are disqualified. We have real hard evidence that within a very few years conditions for baptism were being imposed by the Christian church. The story as we have heard it this morning came from a modern translation. Had we read it from the Authorised Version it would have contained a verse that is now always omitted, because we now know it was added to the text later. There, after the Eunuch says: What doth hinder me to be baptised - the Western Text, as it is known, has Philip saying 'If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest' - and the Eunuch replying 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God'. Scholars are clear that this is a reflection of 2nd century practice - and of their concern at the story of this apparently sudden baptism, when they were developing a scheme of things in which you could only be baptised after full instruction and at certain times. We had a wonderful Baptism here on Easter Sunday - by the 4th century it was in many places *only* on Easter Day that baptisms could take place.

What happens today? There are extremes: at one end of the scale there are those who baptise anything that moves, so it seems, and with absolutely no questions asked. And at the other extreme, there are those who demand proof of faith in one way or another. I recall fifty years ago in Manchester a young couple from my parish wanting to have their baby baptised in the church where they had married. The Vicar there rang me, whilst they were with him, to see what I felt. I said I had no problem with it. But then I asked him what *his* feelings were. His reply was 'I am perfectly happy if they come to Mass regularly for six months.' I asked what they said about that - to which the reply came 'Oh, they seem to have walked out'. I don't believe either extreme is very helpful. If you ask *no* questions, then people may well have not the slightest idea what they are doing; if you impose conditions, then you seem to be coming between them and God. Throughout my years of ministry there have been a constant succession of stories in the press about mothers saying their church has refused to baptise a baby. Of course, there must sometimes be truth in it - but very often the stories are very twisted. I might have hit the headlines myself once. I remember causing great distress to a couple years ago who asked - no *demanded* - that I baptise their child the following

Sunday between 3.00 and 4.00 p.m. - because they had ordered a cake, and sent invitations to the family before ever approaching me.

Of course no one can demand baptism anywhere other than their own parish church. But there, they can - and the only reason permitted for not doing so is not in fact a refusal, but a permission to delay until they have been instructed. So don't let newspapers or gossip delude you - the answer today to the Eunuch's question 'What is to prevent me' is 'Nothing' - providing you are asking at the right place, and - very importantly that you know what you are doing.

We can understand the Christians in the 2nd century who wanted to put that extra verse in. But the story is clear - the Eunuch had asked Philip for instruction in the faith - and it was as a result of his convictions about what Philip had said that he asked for baptism. And that wasn't a six month attendance at Christian worship, or doing an Alpha course, or anything like that. It was a simple conversation.

The doubts were in his mind, though - maybe there was a reason - maybe his nationality, or that fact that he was a Eunuch might be a problem. He had not yet grasped fully the fact that God loved him just as he was. In Jesus, God's promise through Isaiah had been shown again - 'Let no foreigner who has attached himself to the Lord say - the Lord will surely exclude me from his people. Let no eunuch say - and I am a dried-up tree'. Perhaps neither of those reasons come fast to people's minds today. But there are others - 'God and people like me don't mix', I have been told often enough. 'I don't think God smiles on people who do things like I do. I could never be the kind of person God accepts as alright'. Very similar to the Eunuch's query - am I acceptable? It was because of this question that I asked that this morning we sing the hymn Amazing Grace - which is precisely about the fact that God does accept us as we are. Many of you, I am sure know something of the story of John Newton, who wrote it. I have long had a feeling of connectedness to him, because his good friend and first biographer was my predecessor as Vicar of Chobham. We don't know that his friend ever asked him to come a preach there, but I like to think he and I may have occupied the same pulpit. His memorial in St Mary Woolnoth in London reads like this:

'John Newton, Clerk, Once an infidel and libertine; a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved restored and pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.'

He had been a slave-trader, who after a crisis in a storm, found peace with God, gave up his former life, and eventually was ordained at the age of 39 or 40. The hymn expresses well his lifelong wonder that someone like him could be loved by God - and the word grace - God's free love - was terribly important to him - he also wrote, you recall those words 'Saviour, if of Zion's city, I *through grace* a member am Let the world deride or pity, I will glory in thy name.' Grace is God's free unmerited love.

So for any adult - like the Eunuch, like John Newton, baptism says - the past is the past, and God's love can cancel out the past, so that it is no longer hanging round your neck. That remains good news to millions of people. I have spent time people living with awful weights hanging round them from the past - who cannot somehow believe that their past has been dealt with. Now when we baptise a baby of course we are not

talking about the past, but about the future – we are assuring them, their family and everyone that there is nothing they can ever do which will put them beyond God's love and forgiveness.

John Newton seemed almost bewildered by the greatness of God's love. Maybe that is right - it isn't human love, and therefore we humans can hardly grasp it - and we need reminders and assurances. That is the message of our communion service - Christ has died - and I have been buried with him in baptism. Christ is risen - and I have new life in him . Christ will come again - I have a future, not a past, a hope, not a dead weight of guilt. That knowledge of God's free love - his grace - changed John Newton's life. It has changed the lives of people here this morning - it can change all our lives, and nothing that we are, nothing we have been, can prevent that happening.