



He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'

He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'

Acts 8: 30-31

In our reading from Acts we hear of an example of the early church acting on the words Jesus said just before his Ascension... 'and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'. (Acts 1. 8). We hear about the strange encounter of Philip (one of the seven chosen to assist the Apostles in Acts 6:5) and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

On a desert road heading south from Jerusalem to Gaza Philip encounters a strange, exotic-looking foreigner reading a passage from Isaiah. Philip had been compelled to take this particular road not knowing why. He was prepared to listen to God and go where he was sent. The Ethiopian was an important man in his own country. He was a court official in charge of the queen's entire treasury. He was probably well-off in his own right as he was traveling in a chariot and he could afford to have a scroll for his own personal use. He was a learned man so could read and comprehend the literal meaning of the passage but knew he needed help in interpreting it.

So despite his high social status, he invited Philip to join him, who then spends time teaching and guiding him while sharing the good news about Jesus. We don't know what Philip said but we know the resulting action. The Eunuch asked to be baptised and was fully accepted into the family of God. Tradition has it that this is how the gospel enters into Africa, to the people of that time this would have been 'the ends of the earth'.

The Ethiopian understood when you want to deepen your faith the scriptures provide something you can have, hold and take away and read and ponder at your own pace. But sooner or later you come up against a passage that you don't know what it means even after spending time puzzling over it. You realise you need help in interpreting its meaning.

Interpreting just means making sense of a text—it is not a special skill reserved for difficult passages. We will be influenced by our own experiences so an understanding of the cultural and historical background is important. Books written by scholars will help us in our understanding of specific passages or bigger ideas.

When reading we need to remember that the Bible contains diverse types of literature and was written in three different languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) by dozens of authors over a period of approximately 1,500 years. Knowing the genre will help us to interpret a passage. We would not read poetry in the same way as we read an historical account. Some thought about how an author uses language is required, as not all human communication is straightforward but relies on the reader drawing inferences that are not made explicit by just knowing the literal definitions of the words.

The bible was written to reveal God's plan and purposes throughout human history. When reading a passage it is important to look where it fits in with that great story of love that God has for his creation including humankind.

These means of interpretation can be studied individually, but one of the best ways to study the bible is in a group where ideas can be shared and discussed. Then each person can act as a guide to the others as God speaks to all of us through Scripture. In the Mission Community there are many opportunities to share, including Morning Prayer and study groups. Look out for details of a new study group starting soon.