

- “What is there to prevent me from being baptised?”
- This is the question asked in our reading this morning from The Acts of the Apostles by a man from Ethiopia,
 - a court official no less,
 - someone who serves the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians.
- And to our ears, perhaps, it is a deceptively simple question because the answer that comes to mind for us is that there is nothing to prevent this man from being baptised.
- "Bring it on!", we say, because baptism is a good thing,
 - something that as a community of faith we desire for all people,
 - something that is a cause for celebration.
- And it is true.
- Baptism is a good thing,
 - perhaps, even, the best thing!
- But the thing about baptism is that it is also a transgressive act.
- Baptism subverts our everyday notions of what makes us who we are.
- It washes away all the lines that we draw around ourselves,
 - the lines that we use both to define us and to separate us from others whom we mark as different.
- Baptism is a good thing but it is not a simple thing.
- And that question,
 - “What is there to prevent me from being baptised?”
 - is a question that we are still grappling with today in terms of how we understand what it means to be a community of people who seek to love God and to love one another.
- And the issue is not so much that we put particular barriers in the way of people coming for baptism, but rather that we put barriers in the way of people living into their full identity as people who have been baptised.
- The man who asks this question, “What is there to prevent me from being baptised?” Is an Ethiopian, a court official of the Candace, but he is also a eunuch.

- And, as such, he has been “cut off” from full membership of the community of believers.
- And as readers and hearers from another time and place, we, perhaps, need to be drawn further into the story to understand the tragedy of that.
- This man is just returning from pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple, which would have involved a long and difficult journey from Ethiopia.
- And having made such a hard journey, it seems clear to us that this man is someone of sincere and devout faith,
 - someone who seeks to know God.
- Yet, when he arrives in Jerusalem to worship at the temple, the destination of his pilgrimage, what is made plain to him is his “cut off-ness.”
- According to the law of Moses, he would have been forbidden from entering the temple to worship because he is a eunuch.
- It must have been a strange feeling to have arrived at one's destination but not, now or ever, be able to enter into a full experience of that arrival.
- It's like being condemned to forever watch at a distance and never experience the welcome and hospitality and participation that we might anticipate with any “true” arrival.
- And so this man is now on his way home,
 - on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza,
 - a road that the author of this narrative describes as “a wilderness road” which seems a little strange because this is not actually a route through the desert.
- But it is a wilderness road nonetheless for this man because in his experience of “cut off-ness” he is in the middle of nowhere.
- And it is in this wilderness place that he encounters Philip, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples.
- And this is an encounter that is engineered and orchestrated by the Spirit of God.
 - An angel of the Lord has called Philip to this place.
- And it is here in the middle of nowhere, in this place of betwixt and between, that Philip proclaims to this man “the good news about Jesus”, which prompts this man in turn to say,
 - “There is water. What is to prevent me from being baptised?”

- And it seems that the work of the Spirit continues because, without any apparent hesitation, Philip goes down into the water with this man, this eunuch who would have been excluded from worship in the Temple, and baptizes him.
- And in the water of baptism, the line that had been drawn between this man and the worshipping community, the line that marked him as “cut off”, excluded... that line was crossed, washed away, dissolved.
- This man's experience of the Spirit, this man's experience of invitation and welcome into a new community of relationships with God and with a community of faith was like water in a desert,
 - a welling up of life and newness in a place that threatened to remain dry and barren.
- On a wilderness road, in the midst of this experience of being “cut off”, isolated and without hope, the Spirit does the Spirit's work, and draws this man into the promise of life and hope and he is able to say,
 - “Look, there is water. Look, there is life. What is to prevent me from being baptised?”
- This is one of my favourite episodes in the book of Acts.
- And, actually, what it portrays is not an isolated incident.
- As we shall hear in the weeks that follow, what this episode describes is actually a defining feature of the impetus of the Spirit.
- This outward movement toward the inclusion and embrace of all people, heedless of all the boundaries we put in place to define and confine others and ourselves, is something that the Spirit of God does again and again.
- What is being demonstrated here is the love and hospitality of God reaching towards us,
 - working within us and through us,
 - changing us, converting our lives into lives of love,
 - more love, a greater love, for the world and all its people.
- What baptism recognises is the fundamental equality of all people in the eyes of God.
- All are loved and all are welcomed into the community of love that is the Body of Christ, the church.
- And while baptism is a response to the conversion, the coming to faith, of the one being baptised, it is also a converting experience for the whole of the Christian community because it invites us all to understand that there can now be no further grounds for exclusion in our life together.

- All are welcome.
- All are equal recipients of the love of God, equal participants in the life we share.
- To put it in words that we will hear in the weeks to come,
 - “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”.
 - What God has pronounced clean, we cannot continue to define as somehow unclean, unacceptable, or beyond the pale.
- When God says “yes”, we are being invited to understand that we can no longer say “no”.

- God is love.
- And the love that we have for one another is a witness to the love we have experienced.
- The love that we have for one another is a recognition of our shared identity as children of God.
 - We are all the beloved of God.