

Chapel A – and introduction to our tales of inclusion and exclusion

God Is Love

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ **Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.** ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ **Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.** ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ **We love because he first loved us.** ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot^[a] love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Thank you for having me.

So I have called the teaching for this term "Tales of inclusion and exclusion".

We are going to think about ways in which people are included within the gospel, and what that might mean for us, and the way we practice our faith and do church.

But in doing so we will have to think a little bit about how the bible has been used to exclude and maybe tackle some of the places where it does seem to be a bit prejudiced = thinking about disabled people for example or as we've talked about before, women.

That's why the title includes both.

So my hope and aim is this – that we can together think about the biblical basis for being an 'inclusive church' wider than sex and gender, and process together what that decision means for how we read the bible and how we think theologically or as people of faith about our lives.

Because most of us are here because we feel accepted and loved by God. I hope that's why you are here.

And I want to help you celebrate that, find stories in the bible that help you share that welcome with others.

We sort of instinctually think that Jesus is inclusive.

I'd guess for most of us that's part of a conviction of faith – we love God, and we believe God is love. We stood at Pride with a sign that had that verse from 1 John written on it "God is Love, whoever lives in love, lives in God and God lives in him (but lets change it to 'them' now shall we to be properly inclusive).

For me these passages in the first letter of John speak of both equality *and* of what the positioning of my heart should be towards others.

In 1 John the qualifiers for being accepted into a Christian community are so simple.

Love and being loving.

We are called here not to repay Christ's death on the cross because of some guilt ridden theology but rather the writer says *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

For fear has to do with punishment.

Built out of this position, therefore, is a joyous love for one another that doesn't seek to punish but to welcome. That whoever loves God must love his brother – this is stated not only as command but as a motivation – like the writer can't imagine that that isn't the case.

Of course you love other people, you are people of God aren't you?

As though nothing else would be a possibility.

Punishment is abandoned in this passage, acceptance is promoted.

Love is a guiding principle here not because we get something from doing it – *though if we love and include people we will feel benefits* – but because we are already loved ourselves.

Love is the establishment of the cross.

Love is the fundamental ground of our being now that we live in Christ.

And we were not excluded by Christ, so how can we not work to include others?

We all know that bit in 1 Corinthians that lists the qualities that love has. And it's sad cos it gets hauled out at weddings as though it's got anything to do with romance at all.

But it doesn't really.

If we look at the structure of that letter, Paul has just given a huge, long, waffley rant about how we should behave to one another, from about chapter 8 onwards.

I try to limit my time talking about 1 Corinthians as I have been accused of not really knowing any other part of the bible. Its fair.

But I encourage you to go back to that letter and try not to get bogged down on hair cuts and talk of prostitutes and whether you can eat meat - and instead find the line that Paul takes all the way through.

You see Corinthians is a letter all about inclusion and exclusion.

I won't pretend Paul doesn't think there are barriers to the kingdom of God, he does, but they all fall under the banner of a bigger guiding principle.

People are asking him "Can we eat with people who worship idols?"

"If someone else is upset by something, do we have to care, aren't we free in Christ?"

"Should we really let women pray and prophesy?"

"Should poor people really get to eat with us at the same table?"

And Paul, well, Paul spends a long time talking about including peoples feelings in how you do your church practice – he mentions looking after the weakest in the congregation, making space for the poorest so they always feel equal at the Lords Supper, and even that the smallest, weirdest parts of the body have something to teach us about who Christ is. It is all tales of inclusion AND exclusion.

But because we separate our texts into chapter and verses we miss the climax of the whole letter – the point of the whole structure of the letter and the part that would resonate the most, chapter thirteen.

We read the edicts of Paul in separate sections and in doing so we miss the point and guiding principle.

the rhetoric leads us towards the **reason** we should be kind to one another – because faith, hope and love remain when all is said and done and the greatest is love.

A love he describes that is patient and not greedy, that doesn't keep a record of wrongs.

In fact it's so important that he dismisses everything else he's said if it doesn't have love as its basis:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned,^[a] but have not love, I gain nothing.

Performative allyship is not for Paul – don't do things because you have to, do them because you Love.

So, although there is lots of debate in the letter about how to keep holy and what is pure, it always is guided by our connectedness together in the Love of Christ.

In this next term I hope that I can bring some of this positive lens to the biblical texts while still helping us consider where we see people being excluded, either in the bible itself or in our own lives, and so we can work to think about how we include people in practical ways. Some of that work will mean pointing out where people have traditionally been excluded from interpretation of the bible.

Because the more I thought about the idea of inclusion and exclusion in the bible, the longer and longer the list became of traditionally excluded people who actually appear in our Bible. BUT, like with women which you've heard me speak about before, we skim over their differences to see a simple positive message or because we feel awkward talking about the differences being highlighted.

My hope is we can together bring some of that difference to the front. Because inclusion – whether that be about race, gender, sexuality, mental health, physical disability or poverty – is not about us erasing difference, but embracing it and learning from it. Just like the metaphor of the body of Christ – I cannot know everything there is to know about God on my own, I need those who are different to me to fully learn who God is.

With that in mind I want today to finish on one of my favourite stories of inclusion in the New Testament. The story of Phillip and the Eunuch.

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south^[d] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.*

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

*Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."*

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"^[e] ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰

It's a story that gets brought down to one thing -the eunuch being converted to Christ. And that is important. But there is a little more to tease out.

Luke here is lifting up a big flag and reminding his Jewish audience and his strict Greco-roman audience who have strict ideas about what is acceptable behaviour – that it is God who decides what is acceptable.

The eunuch is already reading Isaiah. He may have come from Jewish community in Ethiopia, he may have been a gentile who was a God fearer, he is worshipping in Jerusalem. He is a Eunuch, a servant or often a slave, and we have no knowledge of whether his gendered status or social position were chosen for him or forced upon him. Instead we have to think about what he represents in the text, and what that might mean for us.

This is a vivid example of how Luke often cites a text and alludes to the Old Testament context of his stories, and how we as modern readers often miss the exclusion being presented because we just don't know our Isaiah as well as the gospel writer was expecting 2000 yrs down the line!

The narrative in Acts 8 repeats the passage of scripture that the eunuch was reading—Isa 53:7-8. But hearers or communities that Luke is writing for who know the context in Isaiah, would notice that that the plot of Acts 8:26-38 reiterates the plot of a passage just next to

the Isaiah passage read out - Isa 56:3-5—which reads *“Let no foreigner that is bound to the Lord say: The lord will surely exclude me from his people, and let no eunuch complain ‘I am only a dry tree’, For this is what the Lord says, ‘to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name, better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. “*

Luke is not merely citing scriptures that foretell Jesus (the passage quoted comes from passages about the suffering servant) because that’s what was said that day in the carriage. He leaves out the whole actual explanation of the gospel that Phillip gives of the gospel, which you’d think would be kind of crucial – but, no, he highlights the Isaiah passage, expecting his audience (and therefore sadly this is now our job as we’ve inherited the book) to either know the text or do the work.

Like finding easter eggs in marvel action films that mean the fans know something the rest of us don’t, Luke is making distinct allusions to the inclusion of people in Gods kingdom who are considered not welcome in the laws of Moses (Deuteronomy bans any man with damaged genitalia from entering the temple of God). He’s also found someone that represents the blurring of strict gender boundaries that most of his Greco-roman readers would be used to. It’s important to acknowledge and celebrate this early convert as non-binary or trans.

Eunuchs were often highly prized as servants and this person has an important job we know that from the text, but even so they are a marginalised person. Both in society and in religious life they are only allowed restricted roles, and respect in certain forms, and to be in certain places. They cannot marry or do the things everyone else can.

He also is a foreigner, and in the ancient world these barriers mattered as much as now, so this matters for us thinking about inclusion today.

The Ethiopian Coptic church is one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Coptic manuscripts are some of our earliest and best preserved versions of the texts we now call the New Testament. And yet, this aspect of the eunuch is often over looked. Especially in the way the text has been used in the church.

In plenty of the OT the 'foreigner' and the 'other' are dangerous and represent difficulty. Esau McCaulley writes about the importance to African American churches in particular of this Ethiopian being at the beginning of the early church's expansion. Dr McCaulley challenges us to 'seeing' or bearing witness to the blackness of this man, and how that is important for us to not merely pass by.

In the history of slavery, this black African was erased from commentators' notes, as people sort to use the Bible to uphold ideas of racial characteristics making some people more suited to being enslaved.

Though it seems sometimes that inclusion is saying 'race and gender don't matter', when it comes to really reading the Bible they do.

It mattered for the writer of Luke, it is mentioned because the differences of the Ethiopian eunuch speak to God seeing and loving whoever we are, and our willingness to witness exclusion and put it right.

The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are constantly negotiated throughout scripture, as we see here Deuteronomy and Isaiah don't agree about who is included by God. and Luke reminds us of that just at the beginning of the expansion of the gospel being preached 'unto the nations'.

The Ethiopian eunuch asks a beautiful question in one way, but also one filled with an anxiety we might recognise sometimes in ourselves 'What can stand in the way of me being baptised?'

Maybe he knows the answer, or maybe he is worried he needs to change and wants to know if that's the case.

The text gives no verbal reply.

- no long prayer that Phillip prayed to check he had the right beliefs,
- no complex answer about how the eunuch could live as a person outside the gender binary while following Christ,
- no lecture of theology of gender,
- no talk of his being a foreigner,
- no complex sermon is recorded where Phillip gives him rules to live by.

The answer comes simply as 'they got down into the water'.

As we interrogate ideas of inclusion and exclusion together over the next couple of months I like to think of this as our key text.

It highlights difference, embraces the eunuch where he is regardless of his societal position, and yet creates no barrier to just letting us get down into the water together

Potential Questions for discussion:

Focus on the passage in 1 John 4:

- **talking about 'love' is all well and good but do you find it easy to love people?**
- **Love of brother isn't about feeling but action – what help/support do churches need to give to help us love one another?**
- **Who is hard to love?**

Focus on the passage of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch:

- **How important is it to think about the types of exclusion the Ethiopian Eunuch represents?**
- **Do you feel encouraged by the presence of a non-binary person in the world of the Bible? Has this been focussed on before in your understanding of the mission of the early church?**
- **How can retelling and refocussing the stories we tell from the Bible help us become more inclusive as a community or should we just focus on actions?**
- **How often do we put barriers in the way of people (or ourselves) getting down in the water and meeting Christ that Christ never asked us to?**