

There are some things in life that you naturally avoid. Things you don't want to see. Things you'd rather not talk about. Things that make you wince, cringe, blanch or more colourfully go green about the gills. Things best not said, things best not thought about, things best pushed to the back of your mind into the box marked 'maybe it'll go away if I don't give it any attention' to there languish with that puzzling rash and the latest excited fridge pictures from the Diocesan Fresh Expressions team.

We may be broad minded people of the world, seen it , done it, got the t-shirt but we have our limits, our red lines of taste, the things that are just too embarrassing to bring up. You know that out there are Things you don't want to see, because once seen, never forgotten. Things you'd really rather not talk about. None of that please, we're embarrassed. For untold decades the residents of this cold wet archipelago suffered British food because nobody wanted to face the unpleasantness of what they were eating and so nobody ever spoke up to point out that beans on toast is not actually food. Whoever did finally raise their voice to complain, thank you.

Car accident rubbernecking aside, we avoid in thought and word if not always in deed the embarrassing, the awkward. the disagreeable, the disgusting, the difficult, and the downright eugh.

Which is something of an issue for those of us who would follow Jesus. Because the Bible is a cornucopia overflowing with things embarrassing, awkward, disagreeable, disgusting, and difficult. We cannot follow our instincts here because if we shy away from the challenging parts of the Bible, cut out the bits that make you go eugh, there wouldn't be much of a Bible left. Because there are lots of difficult things in the Bible.

Here's a sample. Wrapping someone up in a carpet and then hammering a tent peg into their head. Lobbing a stone into someone's forehead, then cutting their head off. Getting someone drunk and then cutting their head off. Getting your father in law drunk and pretending to be a sex worker so you can have children with him. Marrying someone and then having his eyes gouged out. Having the entire extended family of a prospective fiancée circumcised as a condition of marriage and then killing them when they're recovering from the op. Murdering someone while they're attending to the call of nature. Sleeping with your father's concubines. Shall I carry on? Perhaps I shouldn't. If I do you might all rush out so you can go home and read your Bibles. Who knew it was like a festering Fellini film in there? Or if Italian cinema's not the right cultural reference, think, Tory Party conference.

If you'd been listening to the readings this morning you might be thinking: yep, but we didn't have any of *that* today. We had John's letter about love and Jesus telling us he's the true vine and we are his branches and that lovely little tale about how reading scripture properly can lead to conversion and baptism. Where's the problem? Nothing we don't want to see there, nothing to make us squirm today. Three readings from the Bible and nothing stomach churning in any of them. If anything, it's all a bit Easter-season beige.

Not so quick. I'm sure some of you will have worked out where this is headed but are hoping that for the sake of decorum and good taste that I'm not going to go there, but you really ought to know me better by now and anyway I'm going to say that if we did insist on skipping over the queasy bit today we'd be missing something vital which may, indeed, be the key for understanding the tale we've been told. So we're going to go back and have a gawp at the Acts reading because to understand it properly it's vital that we notice what we'd rather not consider: the star of the show is a eunuch.

Now that's not a word that tends to crop up in everyday life. I'm pretty sure none of us has ever met a eunuch. Don't worry, I don't intend to go into anatomical detail of what makes a man a eunuch because 1 it's before lunch and 2 there are those of tender years present. But, for those whose understanding of the particulars might be a bit hazy, let's just say it's like when your dog, six months, a year old, goes off to the vets and comes back a little lighter and wearing a plastic cone. Same sort of thing, but for human males. Though they were probably spared the cone of shame.

Many went through the process involuntarily: they were bought as slaves or were the human plunder of a conquered people. A few people became eunuchs voluntarily in order to get on in life, which in a time before anaesthetics is quite some ambition. Some may even have been offered for the op by their families in an ancient world equivalent of the pushy parent. Getting your precocious progeny to join the trebles choir is *much* kinder.

Odd though it seems to us, eunuchs were part of the scenery of the ancient social landscape; always a small and somewhat exotic minority true, but familiar enough, so when Theophilus first excitedly read the Acts of the Apostles to his church nobody would have put their hand up and said 'what's a eunuch'? They'd have recognised the sort from the scriptures: there are eunuchs in Holofernes entourage in Judith, in the

Persian court in Esther, in the Jerusalem court in Jeremiah. Famously for Christians, Jesus mentions eunuchs in a speech that has caused conservative commentators contortions ever since trying to explain what he meant. Whatever he did mean, we must presume that Jesus presumed that his listeners at least knew the kind of person he is talking about and the eunuch not a sort of person unknown outside the more exotic niches of the royal harem.

Part of the social landscape they may have been, but like tax collectors and soldiers, eunuchs were generally not liked in the ancient world. They were associated with the royal court shenanigans which were never nice; they were close to the royal power, which was rarely benign; they looked different- people never like that- they dressed different and *were* different. Neither what you'd expect of a man nor what you'd expect of a woman, they didn't fit neatly into any recognisable slot. Recall the stigma attached to childlessness in the Bible, the joy attached to fertility. Eunuchs were cut out of that system of family and reproduction which completely dominated ancient society. For that reason alone they were highly offensive. And of course there was always the added ick factor of knowing that, well, something's missing.

So. Taking all that into account, when a eunuch features in a Bible tale I think we have to accept that his being there is not just local colour, not simply incidental detail like saying he made tents for a living or dealt in purple cloth. His particular presence there is telling us something the writer thinks we need to know about God.

Let's just go back and remind ourselves again. People did not like eunuchs. They *really* hated them. Religious people too. If you want to explain in a nutshell the thinking behind all those Torah prohibitions about diet and purity and clothing and so on, they are about excluding whatever doesn't fit neatly into a category, they are about excluding those things that transgress boundaries. Pigs are unclean because they straddle two separate animal categories- those with cloven hoofs and those that don't chew cud. A person becomes unclean if they touch a corpse because they have transgressed the boundary between living and dead. God's creation has a place for everything, and everything that is not in its place is therefore unclean. And what could be more transgressive, more out of place, more offensive to faith than a eunuch?

Yet, here is the Holy Spirit sending out Philip the deacon to explain Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch and then, by baptism, welcoming him fully into the fellowship of faith. Without telling him what a miserable sinner he is first. Without rubbing his

nose in his impurity or setting special conditions for his coming in so he doesn't pass on his impurity to anyone else. Like women and tax collectors and sex workers and Gentiles and all those other unmentionable untouchable outsiders that gathered around Jesus, here is a eunuch, welcomed to the feast. The embarrassing, the awkward, the disagreeable, the disgusting, the difficult, and the downright eugh, with a seat at the table, just like everybody else

Here, then, is a new understanding of the religion of Israel, here then is a radical understanding of God, here is enacted in real time Peter's great message 'God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean'.

This, let me be clear, is not a message that is only important for the excluded, for the marginalised, for those that the majority world has said are unclean. It's a message for everyone: those whom the world loves, those whom it doesn't; those who are in the minority and those who are in the majority; those who are different and those who are like everybody else. Because we cannot be a family if some of our siblings are not present. Because if we're not all sat at the table, then we're not ready, because the party doesn't start till all the guests are here. Because we've not got our seat at the banquet by right, because we're the right sort of person and we've earned our place. We've got that seat because Jesus wants us there.

So, we rejoice that the eunuch is welcomed, not because we are eunuchs, but because in the welcome of him we see God's love. Love beyond our human loves and hates, beyond our joys and fears, beyond our categories and boundaries. Love for us. Perfect love.