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The mysterious case of the Ethiopian eunuch:

An empirical and psychological examination in biblical hermeneutics

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Abstract

During the Easter Season Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary invites participating churches to draw on early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles as the guiding reading for the principal Sunday service. This study employs the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to engage a group of 24 Anglican clergy serving in Eastern Newfoundland to reflect on the Easter message within the mysterious case of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8: 26-40. By inviting these clergy to work in type-alike groups this study draws attention to the distinctive voices of sensing types, intuitive types, feeling types, and thinking types, as defined by psychological type theory. Sensing types gave close attention to the details within the text. Intuitive types identified the big themes arising from the text. Feeling types focused on the characters, the relationships and the values within the narrative. Thinking types analysed the issues and problems arising from the narrative. These data supported the hermeneutical theory proposed by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and illustrated the value of drawing on all four psychological functions in order to enrich the process and content of liturgical preaching.

Keywords: psychology, bible, psychological type, biblical hermeneutics, preaching, SIFT approach

Introduction

The Revised Common Lectionary invites participating churches to draw on early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles as the guiding reading for the principal Sunday service during the Easter Season for Year B of the lectionary cycle (see, for example, Revised Common Lectionary, 1997). It is this emphasis within the lectionary that may encourage preachers during this season to focus less strongly on the Gospel reading and pay closer attention to the structure and content of the Acts of the Apostles. The redaction critical approach to biblical texts has long recognised the common authorship of Luke's Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles and identified common themes and common authorial intentions between the two works (see, for example, Conzelmann, 1960).

The more recent turn of attention within biblical criticism away from the primary focus on the authors (as in redaction criticism) to the primary focus on the readers (as in reader-perspective approaches) has given much more attention to the reader engagement with the Gospels than to the reader engagement with the Acts of the Apostles. For example, the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching (located within the reader-perspective approaches) has been explored by empirical studies in relation to passages from all four gospels. The following passages have been explored from Matthew: the birth narratives reported in Matthew 2: 13-20 (Francis & Smith, 2013); the invitation to reflect on the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in Matthew 6: 25-30 (Francis, Smith, & Francis-Dehqani, 2018); searching for the lost sheep in Matthew 18: 10-14 (Jones & Francis, 2019); the narrative of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew 20: 1-15 (Francis, Smith, & Francis-Dehqani, 2018); the narrative of separating sheep from goats reported in Matthew 25: 31-46 (Francis & Smith, 2012); the distinctive Matthean pericopes on the involvement of Judas (Matthew 27: 3-10) and of Pilate (Matthew 27: 19-25) in the passion narrative (Francis & Ross, 2018), and the resurrection narratives reported in Matthew 28: 1-15 (Francis & Jones,

2011). The following passages have been explored from Mark: the narrative concerning John the Baptist reported in Mark 1: 2-8 (Francis, 2013; Francis & Smith, 2014); the healing of the paralysed man lowered through the roof in Mark 2: 1-2 (Francis & Jones, 2015b); the missionary journey reported in Mark 6: 7-16 (Francis & Jones, 2015a; Francis, Smith, & Francis-Deqhani, 2017); the narrative of the feeding of the five thousand reported in Mark 6: 33-41 (Francis & Jones, 2015b); the feeding of the five thousand reported in Mark 6: 34-44 (Francis, 2010); the healing of blind Bartimaeus reported in Mark 10: 45-52 (Smith & Francis, 2016); the cleansing of the Temple and the incident of the fig tree reported in Mark 11: 11-21 (Francis, 2012a, Francis & ap Siön, 2016b); and the resurrection narratives reported in Mark 16: 1-8 (Francis & Jones, 2011). The following passages have been explored from Luke: the birth narratives reported in Luke 2: 8-16 (Francis & Smith, 2013); the narrative concerning John the Baptist reported in Luke 3: 2b-20 (Francis, 2013; Francis & Smith, 2014); the call of the first disciples and the miraculous catch of fish reported in Luke 5: 1-7 (Francis & ap Siön, 2017); and the post-resurrection appearance on the Road to Emmaus reported in Luke 24: 13-35 (Francis & ap Siön, 2016a; Francis & Smith, 2017). The following passages have been explored from John: the feeding of the five thousand reported in John 6: 4-22 (Francis, 2012b; Francis & Jones, 2014); and the washing of the disciples' feet at the last supper reported in John 13: 2b-15 (Francis, 2015). The aim of the present study is to extend this research tradition to a passage from the Acts of the Apostles proposed for the principal Sunday service during Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary.

The SIFT approach

Within the broader context of the reader-perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics the SIFT approach is distinctive in the way in which the reader is located within the field of the psychology of individual differences. The argument is that the ways in which text is read and interpreted vary systematically according to the psychological predispositions

of the reader. The specific model of individual differences, psychological type theory, on which the SIFT approach builds was originally shaped by Jung (1971) and subsequently developed by a series of psychometric instruments that operationalise the theory for empirical studies, including the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). This model distinguishes between two core psychological processes, the perceiving process that is concerned with gathering information and the judging process that is concerned with evaluating information. Jung helpfully described perceiving as the irrational process since it *was not* concerned with evaluation, and judging as the rational process since it *was* concerned with evaluation. The theory suggests that each process is reflected in two contrasting functions. The two perceiving functions are styled sensing and intuition. The two judging functions are styled feeling and thinking. Jungian theory suggests that optimal human functioning draws on all four psychological functions: sensing (S), intuition (I), feeling (F), and thinking (T). The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics argues that rich engagement with the Word of God is enhanced by the engagement of all four psychological functions.

In terms of the perceiving functions, sensing types focus on the given evidence of the present situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to be concerned with specific details, rather than the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real, and the practical. They tend to be down to earth and matter of fact. Intuitive types focus on the possibilities of the situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They tend to concentrate on associations, intuitions and the wider themes that go well beyond the sense perceptions. They tend to focus on the bigger picture and on the future possibilities, rather than on specific facts and details (see Francis, Smith, & Francis-Dehqani, 2017, p.1).

In terms of the judging functions, feeling types form evaluations based on subjective personal and interpersonal values. They emphasise compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness and for their desire for peace. They are more concerned to provide harmony, than to adhere to abstract principles. Thinking types form evaluations based on objective, impersonal logic; they emphasise integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and for their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be more important than cultivating harmony (see Francis, Smith, & Francis-Dehqani, 2017, pp. 1-2).

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to take the passage from the Acts of the Apostles designated by the Revised Common Lectionary for the fifth Sunday of the Easter Season (the mysterious case of the Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8: 26-40) and to explore how the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching may illuminate the content and potential within the passage. The opportunity to structure workshops to explore this passage of scripture within type-alike groups of experienced preachers was provided by a full-day programme convened by the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador during Easter Week 2018 as part of the Diocese's commitment to the professional development of clergy. Easter Week was an ideal time for inviting clergy to focus on the lectionary for the Easter Season.

Method

Procedure

The day was attended by 24 clergy serving within the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, including active stipendiary clergy and active retired clergy. The programme was introduced by a theologically-informed reflection on the central role of community in the call into Christian discipleship, in engagement within the eucharistic

fellowship, and in exploring the conversation between the Word of God and the People of God. Drawing on the theology of individual differences, the participants were then reminded of the building blocks of psychological type theory, and invited to select their best fit on the preference between sensing and intuition (the two perceiving functions) and on the preference between feeling and thinking (the two judging functions). In each case participants were invited to assign themselves to one of three groups. In terms of the perceiving process, six participants identified themselves as clear sensing types, eight identified themselves as clear intuitive types, and the remaining ten preferred to occupy the middle territory. In terms of the judging process, seven participants identified themselves as clear feeling types, six identified themselves as clear thinking types, and the remaining nine preferred to occupy the middle territory (by this time, after lunch, two participants had left to take funerals).

The participants spent the rest of the day working in hermeneutical communities. During the morning, the hermeneutical communities structured on the basis of the perceiving process (clear sensing types, clear intuitive types, and the middle group) explored Acts 8: 26-33. They were given the following instructions:

Here is the beginning of Luke's narrative about Philip encountering the Ethiopian eunuch.

What do you see in this narrative?

What sparks your imagination in this narrative?

During the afternoon, the hermeneutical communities structured on the basis of the judging process (clear feeling types, clear thinking types, and the middle group) explored Acts 8: 34-40. They were given the following instructions:

Here is the continuation of Luke's narrative about Philip encountering the Ethiopian eunuch.

What touches your heart in this narrative?

What sparks your mind in this narrative?

The passage concerning the mysterious case of the Ethiopian eunuch was divided in this particular way to differentiate between the first part of the narrative that was rich in content to engage the perceiving functions and the second part of the narrative that was rich in content to engage the judging functions.

Analysis

One of the authors was present in the group of clear sensing types and then in the group of clear feeling types. The other author was present in the group of clear intuitive types and then in the group of clear thinking types. As non-participating observers they took detailed notes of the conversations, paying attention both to the content and to the process. The results section of this paper presents a summary and analysis of the notes taken within this context.

Results

Sensing

The group of six sensing types prepared for the activity in a practical and business-like way. They began by reading the passage aloud in a deliberate manner. Then one member of the group appointed himself as the leader in order to manage and order the discussion. As leader he was clear that he was not going to feedback to the plenary session for the group. However, in his role as leader, he was not disconcerted by the fact that no one was volunteering to take notes and to accept responsibility for reporting on behalf of the group. The initial intention of this group of sensing types was to work systematically through the narrative in order to identify the details and to picture the scene.

For this group the scene began by picturing a crossroad. Philip was standing at the crossroad, looking to the south and to the north, to the east and to the west. They pictured

Philip looking at the different roads stretching out before him. The road heading south from Jerusalem to Gaza was a wilderness road.

The group pictured the wilderness road. It was uninviting. It was dangerous. It was lonely. The wilderness was not the place to travel. The scene was enriched by picturing the angel of the Lord. There was discussion and debate about what this angel looked like and how Philip recognised the angel. Some members of the group pictured the angel as a person, and some drew on classic iconography, but others demythologised the figure. For some the angel was a voice speaking in Philip's head, and for others a trusted friend speaking out to Philip the word from God.

The scene was developed as Philip journeyed south and met with the Ethiopian eunuch. This part of the narrative was more difficult to picture since the passage provided little real detail. What was clear, however, was that the Ethiopian was not a native of Jerusalem, but a foreigner. The Ethiopian was not travelling alone but was riding in a chariot and probably had an entourage of people around him. He was a high-standing court official of the Queen of the Ethiopians.

The group pictured the Ethiopian eunuch sitting in the chariot and reading the passage of Isaiah. They saw Philip running alongside the chariot listening to the familiar words from the Prophet Isaiah. Philip interrupted the reading and asked the question, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'. They heard the Ethiopian eunuch reply with another question, 'How can I understand what I am reading, unless someone guides me?'.

The scene was developed as they watched Philip get into the chariot and sit beside the Ethiopian eunuch. Strangely the group of sensing types did not try to picture the poetic text offered from Isaiah in the same way as they had explored the rich texture of the earlier narrative.

At this point the group of sensing types shifted their interest from picturing the scene to considering how they would preach a sermon on the passage. They were clear that they would re-tell the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in their own words, and they would change the story to fit their own cultural context. Newfoundland does not offer a rich pastoral context in which sheep flourish, so sheep are an unfamiliar sight to Newfoundlanders. One member of the group suggested paraphrasing the quotation from Isaiah to replace sheep with moose, 'Like a moose he was led to the slaughter'. No one objected that this may have disturbed the Passover imagery within the passage.

Moving on to the second question, 'What sparks your imagination in this narrative?', generated three main themes. The first theme was sparked by the one-on-one encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Here is a model of evangelism that is intensive and time demanding. Today's church may undervalue this kind of investment in individuals, seeking bigger and quicker returns to fill emptying churches. Yet Jesus employed the same method when he walked alongside the disciples on the Emmaus Road. The second theme identified a sense of excitement in the text as the narrative unfolds. There is a sense of excitement about the journey to faith that may be missing in today's church. The third theme focused on the active work of the Spirit in the narrative. The Spirit prompted Philip to run over to the chariot and to join it. Today's church also needs to be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit. For this group of sensing types all three themes were of a highly practical nature and gave practical clues as to how ministry might be shaped and developed.

Intuition

The group of eight intuitive types were much more interested in exploring the passage than in ensuring that anyone was listening and taking notes. No one volunteered to be responsible for reporting back to the plenary session and no one seemed at all bothered by

this. The primary intention of this group of intuitive types was to let their own ideas flow, but not to try too hard to build on the ideas of others.

The first idea was sparked by the image that an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip. Is this to be taken literally or figuratively? Did Philip really see an angel? Did Philip really hear an angel speak? The big theme is about how God communicates with individuals.

The second idea was sparked by further thought about the way in which people who are not used to talking about angels would respond to the story. What do people make of such a story today? Do they just dismiss this story, and many religious stories, simply as myths. The big theme is about how ‘myths’ continue to have power in a secular world?

The third idea was sparked by the image of the wilderness. Here the Ethiopian eunuch was traveling on a dangerous road down from Jerusalem, perhaps the same road in which Luke had located the wounded traveller ignored by the priest and by the Levite, but aided by the Good Samaritan. The big theme is about facing danger by reading from the word of God.

The fourth idea was sparked by further thought about the way in which peculiar encounters can happen in peculiar places. Here two strangers met, engaged in conversation for the first time and reached great spiritual depth in the conversation. The big theme is about how God uses (or orchestrates) chance encounters to change people’s lives.

The fifth idea was sparked by the image of the Ethiopian eunuch reading out loud so that others could hear and benefit from his reading. This community experience was contrasted with the solitary contemporary experiences of listening through solitary earphones or reading on solitary smart phones. The big theme is about contrasting community in the ancient wilderness and isolation within modern crowd.

The sixth idea was sparked by further thought about the peculiar status of the Ethiopian eunuch. Here is someone of significant power and authority with oversight of the royal treasury. At the same time he is someone excluded from key aspects of human

experience and expectations. The big theme is about the complexity of human life, human ambition and human reward.

The seventh idea was sparked by the image of the Ethiopian eunuch engaged on a spiritual quest, reading and pondering over the revelation of religious texts. He was intrigued, puzzled and searching. The big theme is about the diverse spiritual quests going on among people today, perhaps particularly among those who see themselves looking for spiritual answers outside the religious traditions.

The eighth idea was sparked by further thought about the Ethiopian eunuch's spiritual quest. Philip engaged in that quest by positioning himself where the eunuch had already begun. Philip engaged with what the eunuch was reading. He sat beside him, and asked the simple question, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'. The big theme is about spiritual accompaniment and about beginning by listening to the stranger.

The ninth idea was sparked by placing this passage within the wider context of how Luke creates narrative. In Luke's Gospel (chapter 4), Jesus was reading from the Prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he had been brought up. There the passage began, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'. There Jesus proclaimed, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Now after the resurrection, in Acts (chapter 8) Luke draws on another passage from Isaiah and points to the same conclusion, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' The big theme here is about how Luke positions the Christian story as fulfilling the Jewish expectation.

When time ran out, a rich tapestry of intuitive ideas was still flowing. Yet no attention had been given to the other question, 'What do you see in this narrative?'. No attention had been given either to the practical detail regarding how the deliberations of the group of intuitive types would be reported back in the plenary session.

Feeling

The group of seven feeling types began by reading the passage aloud and then by allowing a few minutes of silence for members of the group to reflect on what they had read and heard. No one wanted to take responsibility for feeding back to the plenary session, but one participant stepped into the role of leading the group and implicitly accepted responsibility for reporting to the plenary session. This group naturally gravitated to discussing the question, 'What touches your heart in the narrative?'

The first aspect of the narrative to touch the hearts of this group of feeling types was the gentle way in which Philip approached the Ethiopian eunuch. Here Philip's gentle walk alongside the Ethiopian eunuch allowed the Gospel message to be proclaimed by what Philip did and by the way in which Philip did it. The hearts of the group of feeling types were touched by the way in which Philip's proclamation resulted in the Ethiopian eunuch's desire to be baptised. Philip's ability to get alongside the Ethiopian eunuch and to value him were important factors in Philip's ability to evangelise. The hearts of the group of feeling types were touched by Philip's enthusiasm. This enthusiasm pervaded the whole narrative and must have been an infective contributing factor to the Ethiopian eunuch's desire to be baptised.

The hearts of this group of feeling types were touched by the interaction between Philip and the Spirit. Here was a close relationship that motivated Philip's actions. Earlier in the narrative the Spirit seems to have prompted Philip to begin his work alongside the Ethiopian eunuch in quite a gentle way. The Spirit simply said to Philip, 'Go over to the chariot and join in'. When Philip had finished his work with the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, the Spirit intervened in a less gentle way and 'snatched Philip away'. Some members of the group felt that this was a harsh word and a harsh ending to the close relationship that was developing between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

The hearts of the group of feeling types were warmed by the way in which both Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch were transformed by the encounter on that road. The Ethiopian

eunuch went on his way rejoicing. Philip was energised to continue travelling on his way to Caesarea proclaiming the good news to all the towns through which he passed.

The hearts of this group of feeling types were touched by the way in which Philip's ministry had brought one person to faith. Their hearts were touched by the importance of rejoicing at one person coming to faith. For them this was an important reminder that in today's church they should continue to rejoice over the individuals who come to faith and not to be despondent when large numbers are not coming to faith.

The hearts of this group of feeling types were touched when they remembered that the narrative was not about what Philip did, but about what the Spirit did through Philip. For them this was an important reminder that their own ministry was not about them, but about what the Spirit was doing through them.

Turning to the second question, 'What sparks your mind in this narrative?', made this group of feeling types think more clearly about baptism. Was the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch both by water and by the Spirit? What did baptism mean in this context? What was meant by the narrative saying that, 'When they came out of the water, the Spirit snatched Philip away'? What did the Ethiopian eunuch see at this point? What was his experience of the Spirit? What were the parallels with the Baptism of Jesus? This conversation sparked a lot of questions and very few answers. The group of feeling types began to feel less comfortable than before and seemed pleased when the session was brought to an abrupt end by the call to return to the plenary session.

Thinking

The group of six thinking types began their examination of the passage with the deliberate decision to deal with the thinking perspective first. The decision was to begin by playing to their strength and by seeing how the feeling perspective may emerge along the

way. The primary intention of this group of thinking types was to analyse the coherence of the narrative and to tease out the problems.

The group of thinking types was puzzled about what the Ethiopian eunuch was doing reading that passage from Isaiah in the first place. He was clearly committed to the Jewish tradition. He had, after all, come to Jerusalem to worship. If he had come to share in the Passover, then he may have been attracted to literature about slaughtered sheep. But why was he reading this passage that the Early Church so clearly linked with Jesus' death? Was he already engaged with exploring developing Christian interpretation of Jewish prophecy?

The group of thinking types was puzzled by the Ethiopian eunuch's familiarity with the initiation rite of baptism. How had he come to know about baptism, unless Philip had made reference to baptism when 'he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus'?

The group of thinking types was puzzled by the Ethiopian eunuch's negatively posed question, 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?'. Was he expecting to be excluded from Christian initiation? He had already been to Jerusalem where he would have stood on the outside of the faith community, excluded because he was Ethiopian and excluded because he was a eunuch. His question already anticipates further exclusion.

The group of thinking types was puzzled by the way in which the Spirit that had called Philip to join the chariot also snatched Philip away as soon as the job of baptism had been done. Surely the Ethiopian eunuch would have benefitted from a more engaged period of post-baptismal formation? What was so urgent about Philip carrying on proclaiming the good news at Azotus and through to Caesarea?

The group of thinking types was puzzled about the way in which the Ethiopian eunuch went on his way rejoicing when he saw Philip no more. What was he rejoicing about? And what did this baptism mean for the rest of his life? How life changing was the baptism for the Ethiopian eunuch? In his previous life in charge of the Queen's treasury, the Ethiopian

eunuch had great power, but at the personal cost of being an outsider to the religious community. Once his baptism got known, how would his life change?

The group of thinking types was puzzled about the role of Philip in this encounter. One member of the group (who was well versed in the structure of the Acts of the Apostles) reminded the group that this narrative was not about Philip the Apostle, but about Philip the Deacon. Philip the Deacon had been called, alongside Stephen, to deal with service within the community rather than to baptise and to preach. But now the Spirit had called and had empowered Philip the Deacon to interpret the scriptures, to proclaim the good news about Jesus, and to baptise with water. Perhaps the narrative offers insights into the developing patterns of ministry within the Early Church.

This conversation about Philip the Deacon led the group of thinking types to reconsider the structure of the pericope of Acts 8: 26-40 within the Lucan narrative. Had the focus really been on the Ethiopian eunuch the narrative could have closed at verse 39 when he went away rejoicing. However, the inclusion of verse 40 refocuses the narrative on Philip. The narrative begins with the angel of the Lord directing Philip onto a new path and ends when Philip arrived in Caesarea.

The group of thinking types was also concerned to distil the significance of the narrative for life in the church today. Two points came to mind. The first point was carried by the weight of the Ethiopian eunuch's cry that he could not understand the scriptures without someone to guide. Here was a reminder of the call to the church today to unlock the scriptures for an increasingly secular world. The second point was carried by the weight of Philip's unhesitating response to the Ethiopian eunuch's plea for baptism. Here was a reminder of God's gracious invitation to baptism extended to all, and perhaps a caution against today's church placing too many barriers in the path to baptism.

By this point time was running out. One member of the group of thinking types recalled the second part of the exercise concerned with the question, ‘What touches your heart in the narrative?’. Another member of the group quickly volunteered the response, ‘What touches my heart is the image of the two of them walking down to the water together, and Philip baptising the Ethiopian eunuch before the Spirit snatched him away.’ The other members of the group were content that this question had now been adequately addressed.

Conclusion

This study was positioned within the context of a series of previous studies that had explored the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching, as developed by Francis and Village (2008), to a range of biblical material presented within the four Gospels. The original contribution provided by the present study has been the extension of this research tradition to a specific passage within the Acts of the Apostles, namely the mysterious case of the Ethiopian eunuch as recorded in Acts 8: 26-40. The data have clearly demonstrated that the underpinning principles on which the SIFT approach works operate equally effectively within this additional genre of biblical literature. In line with the predictions advanced by psychological type theory, clear type characteristics emerged from the groups that drew together participants with clear preference for sensing, participants with clear preference for intuition, participants with clear preference for feeling, and participants with clear preference for thinking. Sensing types gave close attention to the details within the text and saw things that remained invisible to intuitive types. Intuitive types perceived big themes arising from the text and drew connections that sensing types would not have imagined. Feeling types focused on the characters, the relationships and values within the narrative and discovered material to touch the heart that were not obvious to thinking types. Thinking types analysed issues and problems arising from the narrative that would not so naturally have occurred to feeling types. These findings, read in conjunction with the findings

arising from the earlier studies employing the SIFT approach to Gospel passages, raise three main questions.

The first question concerns the specific experience of working in type-alike groups. What is special about such groups and why do they allow type characteristics to emerge with such clarity? The answer is rooted in a psychological appreciation of type theory and suggests that, for example, when individuals who have a clear preference for intuition are working together in a group devoid of sensing types, the intuitive function is allowed to roam freely without being called back into check by sensing types. Intuitive types are energised by the spontaneous creativity of new ideas and new connections. Similarly, when individuals who have a clear preference for sensing are working together in a group devoid of intuitive types, the sensing function is allowed to settle seriously to the task in hand and to get the job done, without being distracted by the intrusion of intuitive restlessness in face of such a focused activity. Sensing types are energised by getting greater clarity and by organising the evidence. In the same way feeling types and thinking types discover that their preferred judging function flourishes in the absence of the opposing judging function. As a consequence, workshops of this nature provide opportunity for an enriched engagement with text. Then the real disclosure takes place when the parallel groups come back into plenary and share their insights.

The second question concerns the theological implications of these empirical findings. What do the findings say about the revelatory power of scripture and about how the Church should regard the engagement between the People of God (who display various psychological type preferences) and the Word of God (that is read and interpreted differently according to different psychological type preferences). Is the revelatory power of scripture to be conceptualised as the conversation between the individual reader encountering the text in powerful isolation? Or is the revelatory power of scripture to be conceptualised as the

conversation between the convened community of readers and the text shared in disciplined, structured and open dialogue? Where do the scriptures stand in the contemporary Church and what is believed about their revelatory power?

The third question concerns the practical implications arising from these empirical findings. How should the individual preacher commissioned to preach within the liturgical context implement the implications of the SIFT approach? The practical answer proposed by Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002) in their three volumes applying the SIFT approach to the principal Gospel lections of the Revised Common Lectionary is to bring each of the four functions (sensing, intuition, feeling, and thinking) to bear systematically on the Gospel passage. There are two principles at work in this approach, one theological and one psychological. The theological principle suggests that, if each of the four functions contributes distinctive insights into the Word of God, the proclamation would be partial without taking seriously and addressing carefully each of the four voices. The psychological principle recognises that each congregation is likely to comprise individuals whose spiritual quest is shaped most clearly by one of the four functions. The SIFT method is designed to nurture this variety of individuals both by ensuring that their dominant function is addressed and by ensuring that their other three less dominant functions are stretched, in order to enrich, to widen, and deepen their engagement with the Word of God.

Future studies exploring the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching may wish to build on the present study by engaging with further passages from the Acts of the Apostles, but also by engaging other genre within the scriptures. For example, within the Old Testament, the Psalms may offer a rich resource on which to test and to extend this approach.

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Appendix 1**Acts 8: 26-33**

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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 silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

Here is the beginning of Luke’s narrative about Philip encountering the Ethiopian eunuch.

What do you see in this narrative?

What sparks your imagination in this narrative?

Appendix 2**Acts 8: 34-40**

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Here is the continuation of Luke’s narrative about Philip encountering the Ethiopian eunuch.

What touches your heart in this narrative?

What sparks your mind in this narrative?