

Sermon – *In the Footsteps of the Apostles - Saul*

Linda Driver
Athelstone Uniting Church #64
5 May 2019

Text: Acts 9:1-20 [NIV]

Well, it's good to be back! It's only been a week, but somehow it feels more than that! After our Easter celebrations, it was good for Paul and I to be able to have a lovely relaxing time with friends – including Ann and Trevor Phillips - on the Yorke Peninsula.

I hear good things about Liellie McLaughlin's message about Believing Thomas last week! I had the opportunity to thank her during the week. She commented on what a blessing it was for her to join you all in worship. So thank you for making her so welcome.

We are now moving in to a new season after Easter, when we will follow in the footsteps of the apostles.

Each week we will look closely into the story of one of the apostles and how they encountered Jesus.

A question for you: Have you been to the 'bible lands'? Have you been to some of the places where Paul and the apostles of Acts went? If so, could you please let me know after the service? I haven't had the opportunity to go yet.. and I would love to hear from those who have!

This morning we begin with the dramatic story of Saul on his journey to Damascus!

Let's pray

Risen Lord Jesus

Draw near.. as we lean into you..

Open our eyes to see

Open our ears to hear

your Word to us this morning. Amen.

Wow! What a dramatic story. Such a huge transformation in Saul! Let's take a closer look..

Our reading is set some time in the years AD34 to 40 - just a few years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. The apostles of Jesus have been spreading the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. The chief priests and the keepers of the Law were not happy about this message of good news and the disruption it was causing to their way of life, to religious practice and to the status of the Israel!

Being able to maintain identity was crucial. Reports that members of this new movement were teaching with new understandings of scripture was a threat to them. It could undermine their sense of identity and it would have caused outrage.

So they instructed the apostles not to teach in the name of Jesus. But the apostles still went ahead and were greatly persecuted for it. As they were persecuted they spread out across the lands and increased in number. The word was spreading about this new Way.

And then into the picture comes Saul.

Now some say that Saul is the name his fellow Jews called him and that Paul was his formal name, used in the wider world. Others associate the change in name from Saul to Paul with his 'conversion' experience on the road to Damascus.

Anyway, Saul was intent on destroying this new church. Back in Acts 8, it says that, going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Later, he himself said that he had persecuted the church of God.

Saul was 'chasing down' followers of The Way who have fled to Damascus in Syria¹ when we come to the dramatic scene on the road.

At the time, 'Christian' wasn't a term used yet.. these people were known as followers of "The Way." How interesting that Saul travelled great distances persecuting these followers of "The Way" only to be struck down on 'the way' to Damascus. And looking ahead, his call was also characterized by life on the road (on the way) in his many journeys around the Mediterranean.²

Eric Barreto says that

"The Way" is a powerful metaphor for Christian identity. Instead of being identified by a set of beliefs, these faithful communities were known by their character in the world. Christian faith was a way of life and one that impelled individuals and communities to leave the safe confines

¹ William Loader: First Thoughts From <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CActsEaster3.htm>

² Eric Barreto: Working Preacher commentary

of home and church to walk on the road God had set out. "The Way" suggests that faith is a living, active way of life.

But let's return to Saul.³

Here he was on the way when suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, he fell to the ground and hears a voice. And that voice is Jesus!

I find it exciting that even though this is past the time when Jesus has ascended to heaven, he still is present with the apostles

And he calls Saul by name..

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Jesus identifies so closely with his people that he takes Saul's persecution personally. When you persecute my people, you persecute me.

After this confrontation, Jesus gives Saul instructions as to what to do next. Get up and go..

Saul got up but could not see and for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink.

Another interesting thing – three days. Three days in darkness. three days to suffer. Three days completely dependent on his fellow travellers. three days perhaps to consider what he had been doing to the people of the Way.

And now we come to Ananias. How much do we know about Ananias? There are a number of people in the Scriptures with the same name. We know that this Ananias was a disciple in Damascus.

Both the orthodox and catholic churches honor him as a saint. He is in their list of the seventy disciples of Jesus, is said to have been bishop of Damascus, and as having died a martyr's death.⁴

What we know from Acts 9 though is that Ananias, like Saul, received a call from Jesus in a vision.

Again Jesus calls him by name. but unlike Saul, Ananias recognised Christ's voice. Yes, Lord he replied..

³ Eric Barreto: Working Preacher commentary

⁴ From <<https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/ananias-1.html>>

Jesus gave him specific instructions on what he was to do. And like many of those called by God before him, Ananias's response was to question God.

But, but...

I've heard about this man...

This is dangerous...

I'm scared...

And Jesus, like many God encounters before, persists and says, "Go!"

And then we hear what his call on Saul would be:

"This man, said Jesus, "is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." (Acts 9:15)

Or as The Message paraphrase puts it:

"Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews."

This was Saul's call: to proclaim Jesus' name to non-Jews and kings and to Jews. It was Saul's call to spread the good news for all the world to hear.

This was a huge call.

Back to Ananias

He followed the instructions he had been given, and went to that house on Straight Street in Damascus – the main east-west thoroughfare of the Romans.

Can you imagine how he felt as he approached that house? How he felt as he entered? How he felt when he approached Saul?

His heart must have been pounding in his chest.

Yet, he did as he had been told: He placed his hands on Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again.

He could see again

He got up

He was baptised

He ate

He regained his strength

And at once, he began to preach – in the synagogues, mind you! – that Jesus is the Son of God.

A complete transformation from the persecutor to risking becoming one of the persecuted.

Wow!

What an amazing transformation.

We know that Paul then went on and spread the good news, planted churches, raised up disciples, mentored, and taught – non-Jews and kings and Jews - all as passionately as he had originally hunted down the people on the Way before his Damascus Road experience.

Jesus, recognised Saul's incredible gifts of communication and tenacity and helped him see with new eyes, the truth that Jesus is the Son of God.. the Messiah!

So what does that mean for us today as we walk as Christ's disciples?

Firstly,... not many of us are going to - or have had – a call - or a Damascus Road experience like Saul / Paul. Perhaps some have..

But we all have the potential to be an Ananias. To be a part of the Story. As Jesus' disciples, we are called to be alert to recognise when Jesus gives us an assignment – and to do it.

We each have a part to play in God's Big Story. We each are part of God's Big Story.

As we walk along our own journeys, following the Way of Christ, we are called to keep our eyes open to Christ's way of seeing the world around us.

And as we heard Jesus say to Paul, that means identifying with the persecuted.. to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free⁵

That can mean being called to do difficult things and to go to unexpected places.

⁵ (Luke 4:18)

Now we could say that Saul's zeal in his earlier life was misdirected. He was so caught up in the right way to do things, to keeping the traditions alive, to sticking to the rules, that he missed seeing or perhaps hearing the message that the followers on the Way were preaching – and needed a dramatic intervention by Jesus to be able to see in a new way.

How many times do we read today of people's zeal being misdirected and even destructive?

Have you ever found yourself being challenged to re-consider long-held beliefs and traditions?

Have you ever found yourself judging others for their way of interpreting Scripture or Christian tradition or Christian practice?

Perhaps then, the second point for us today is to be open to listening to how Christ reveals himself through others – in surprising ways.

That encounter on the Damascus Road was an amazing act of grace. Not only did Saul have a second chance, but he got to embark on an amazing adventure blown along by the wind of the Spirit.

Paul saw himself as a prime example of amazing grace – let me read what he wrote later to the believers in Corinth:

“ the Messiah died for our sins, exactly as Scripture tells it; he was buried; he was raised from death on the third day, again exactly as Scripture says; he presented himself alive to Peter, then to his closest followers, and later to more than five hundred of his followers all at the same time, most of them still around (although a few have since died); he then spent time with James and the rest of those he commissioned to represent him; and he finally presented himself alive to me. It was fitting that I bring up the rear. I don't deserve to be included in that inner circle, as you well know, having spent all those early years trying my best to stamp God's church right out of existence.

But because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am. And I'm not about to let his grace go to waste.”⁶

That amazing grace is available to you and I, to those we agree with and those we don't. let's share that grace abundantly! And leave Jesus to decide who's got it 'right'!

In closing

As I close, I invite you to look down at your shoes

⁶ (1 Cor 15 MSG)

Where are your feet going to take you this week?

I pray that where ever you go, wherever Christ sends you, you will go looking through the eyes of Jesus, your vision transformed with grace-coloured glasses, just as Saul's vision was transformed through his amazing encounter with Jesus on that road to Damascus. Amen

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I'm found
Was blind but now I see

John Newton was a past slave trader who came to faith. the transformation in his life is very likely to have influenced his famous hymn, Amazing Grace.

Let's sing a contemporary rendition of this song – and as you sing, remember that same grace is available to you, to all around you, and to the whole world.

Amazing Grace..