

**Damascus Road Experiences**

*Acts 9:1-9; John 21:1-19*

I recently read of a book called, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* The author suggests that on any given Sunday when ministers look out at their congregations, they should imagine that many of the people sitting in the pews almost did not come that day. They considered staying in bed because the day was too cold and wet, or the day was too nice and they wanted to be outside, or they had people coming to stay and meals to prepare, or the grass needed cutting, or there was something they wanted to watch on the television, or they simply couldn't be bothered. I am sure that wouldn't even remotely apply to Morningside Parish Church...

Some people, it is suggested, considered staying at home because in their hearts and minds their faith did not measure up to what they thought was the faith of others in the congregation. Somehow, because of what they believed, or what they doubted, what they did, or what they did not do, they weren't quite good enough, and were never going to be good enough.

Reading the story about the conversion of Saul, or Paul as he became known later, contributes to this 'faith inferiority complex.' It shouldn't, when we learn a little more about this man who was one of the first great Christian thinkers.

Saul was born in what is now south-western Turkey, in the city of Tarsus – about twelve miles inland from the Mediterranean. He had Roman citizenship. He was brought up in Jerusalem. Saul was a fundamentalist Jew. He was a Pharisee. He believed there should be no change to the way the Jewish faith was practised, and he hated those who tried to amend and alter and reinterpret it – people like Jesus, and people like the followers of Jesus, the first Christians who were known as People of the Way. When the deacon Stephen was martyred by being stoned to death, Saul approved.

In our reading we find Saul, 'still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord', on his way to Damascus to root out the Jewish Christians who were worshipping in the synagogues there.

Off he goes, and somewhere on that road, that long, dusty, barren road, something happens. Saul is surrounded by light; Saul feels he is being spoken to by Jesus, a man he never met and had dedicated his life to eradicate; Saul is blinded and led away helpless, for three days (a not insignificant editorial insertion). A Christian, Ananias, still fearing who Saul was, is inspired to visit and pray with the blinded man. 'Something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight.' He was baptised. He witnessed to his new faith (to the incredulity of other Christians in Damascus and Jerusalem who did not trust him until Barnabas gave him support), and in time he dropped his Jewish name Saul and started using his Roman name Paul – a sign that his calling was not to take the good news to the Jewish world, but to the Gentile world.

A Road to Damascus experience. A time when an individual, set in their ways, decided in their mind, possibly even confirmed in their prejudice, has a complete about-face. Something intervenes, or interrupts, and everything is different. Not many of us are 'breathing threats and murder' against those we oppose, but we've all been on wrong paths that have hurt others and us. We've all been headstrong, stubborn, blinded to our own ambition, selfish to meet our own need, caught in addictive behaviours, and oblivious to the true cost to ourselves.

The hard-driving businesswoman who is so determined to get a promotion that she loses her marriage.

The teenager, angry and hurt, who cannot forgive a parent's error.

The man who is so locked up in his emotions that he cannot express his love for his partner.

The employer whose cultural values prevent him from promoting women equally.

The partisan political leader incapable of compromise.

The sports fan incapable of sporting behaviour.

The political ideologue who sees all benefit receivers as scroungers and ne'er-do-wells.

The person unable to believe that refugees can ever be a good thing and that they're just a cloak for terrorists.

The hard, demanding parent who cannot give a child a break.

The church-goer, prejudiced against recognising same-sex relationships, or women in leadership roles, or people 'not quite like us' in the pews, or children crying during worship, or unwilling to allow divorced people to remarry.

And there will be many more instances in our present darkness, where we have been close-minded, and stubborn.

But, what happens when we see the light?

What happens when awkward, radical, unsettling Jesus looks us straight in the eyes and says, "Hang on a minute. Not in my Name", and we're surprised to find our minds changed, our hearts changed, our attitudes changed, our lives changed.

For Paul it took three days, and I rather suspect that was only the beginning of it. For Ananias, and the Christians in Damascus and Jerusalem, it took a lot longer. The revelation of Jesus challenging our prejudices and ignorance is not only something that happens in one single, blinding light, it can take weeks, months, years to change a life-time of looking at something or someone one way, only to realise that it's been the wrong way, and something like scales fall from our eyes as we see, in the end, what Jesus sees.

There is no time in human history when the Damascus Road experience is not necessary. If we look at the issues facing our world today – the refugee crisis, the climate change crisis, the crisis reporting around the European referendum and Scottish Parliamentary elections, the forthcoming Presidential election crisis in the United States, the contract crisis junior doctors and the Government are embroiled in in England and Wales, the fossil fuel versus renewable energy crisis, the faith crisis in Scotland and dwindling church attendances – there is not one of them into which that searching, life-changing, attitude transforming light of Jesus Christ could not shine without some benefit. Life is not black and white, perspective counts for so much, but when the light comes, what happens when we see it? What happens when, suddenly or gradually, we find ourselves walking the path that leads to life? This is the very stuff of living, and most of us will have experienced it.

What was your blinding light? What changed your mind? What caused you to see reality anew? What finally got through to you that you saw the chaos your stubborn refusal was creating? An honest partner who took a risk by telling you the truth? A young person who heroically tells it like it is? Sometimes it is just the vacancy of our own souls in the middle of the night, and in the dark, that finally convinces us. It is the light that turns on within us. God isn't done with us yet, and will not leave us in the darkness.

Today, the Road to Damascus experience is just as real, and just as necessary, for all of us. Where is God at work in your lives right now? Where do you need to open your eyes and see they light? In what way are you on the wrong path? Where do you need to repent, and turnaround, and let the light confront your darkness?<sup>ii</sup>

As a small boy Robert Louis Stevenson, the famous C19th writer, would sit gazing out of the window of his parent's home, watching the evening shadows fade and dusk give way to darkness. He was fascinated by the old-fashioned lamplighter, who each night would wander down the street lighting the gas street lamps one by one. It is said that on one occasion he was so excited by this that he shouted down to his nanny, 'Look, there's a man coming down the street punching holes in the darkness!'<sup>iii</sup>

Whether it's the Road to Damascus experience, or someone punching holes in the darkness, when Christ's light comes, let it open your minds, and change your hearts.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* P11

<sup>ii</sup> Stephen D Jones, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2, pps 405 & 407*

<sup>iii</sup> Steve Chalke, *Being Human*, p28