

Brother Saul*Acts 9:1-20*

The American novelist Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul, "I reckon that the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse." Despite the Bible doesn't mention the horse, a passage in the Book of Acts is more familiar than this account of Saul's, or Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus.

It's dramatic. A 'Damascus Road' experience has passed into popular culture and signifies a radical change of view or attitude. The original story is set against a backdrop of persecution and violence against the first Christians. It has a villain, Saul of Tarsus. It has bright lights, and voices from heaven. The story is told three times in the Book of Acts. Once here, as part of Luke's narration; and then twice later on speeches attributed to Paul. What of that double vocative, "Saul, Saul", reminiscent of other stories of divine calling in the Bible, "Abraham, Abraham", "Jacob, Jacob", "Moses, Moses". A few weeks ago, on the first Easter morning Jesus only has to call Mary's name once and she not only heard but saw straight away. Does it take a bit more with men to get our attention?

But there are others in the story beside Saul. What about the men on that same road to Damascus, with Saul? They didn't see the blinding light, only something that sounded like a voice, but nobody knew quite what it was. These travelling companions led the blinded man along the road to Damascus. Saul had no sight, and didn't eat or drink for three days; did those men stay with him, or were they out gossiping about what had happened to the arch-persecutor Saul amongst the Jewish community where the followers of Jesus still lived.

And what of Ananias? One of the most extraordinary men in the whole of the Bible. We know nothing about him. Was he one of those who had been persecuted for following Jesus in Jerusalem and fled to Damascus. Did he have family? What was his job? Who were his friends, fellow Jesus-followers, who would almost certainly have tried to dissuade Ananias from going to Saul. "It's a trap. What are you doing, leading him straight to us?"

But there he is, and he too has a direct encounter with God. We might not be sure how God communicates with people, but I suspect most if not all of us will know that feeling, that sense, that instinct we get from time to time to speak to this person, to make that phone call, to send that email, to drop in on that friend, to go down this road, and not that one. Is that what's happening here?

What happens when you, 'see the light'? What happens when you hear your conscience speak? What happens when you suddenly, or gradually, realise the path you're on and where it's taking you? What happens when you make that career choice, and not another one? What happens when you don't go with the crowd, but go down the road less travelled? What happens when that look across a crowded room connects? What happens when you speak to them for the first time, and either straight away, or many years later, that person becomes the love of your life. Your partner, friend, and soul mate?

Hearing about God in this story from long-ago, when you start thinking about it in *that* way, maybe it becomes less unbelievable and more the stuff of everyday living. Our trouble is too often we think miracles are extraordinary, when in fact they happen around us all the time.

What then is it that helps you see the light, and respond to that inner prompting? What changed *your* mind? What caused *you* to see reality in a different way? What finally caused *you* to see where your addictive or unhelpful behaviour would lead? What got through to you so that you saw the chaos or hurt your stubborn refusal was creating? Maybe somebody sat you down and talked to you quietly. Maybe someone said to you in words of less than one syllable what everyone else was thinking but no one wanted to say. Maybe it was just the vacancy in your own soul in the middle of the night when, unable to sleep, the penny suddenly dropped, and you realised what you needed to do.

Might it be that that is what this story is trying to get through to you today? Whether you're a regular church goer here, or somewhere else. Or you're only here for your friends' wedding. Or you forgot to come at Easter and are just catching up. Or you've never seen a wedding during an ordinary service and wondered what it would look like.

Might it also just be the case that God is reaching out, turning on the light brightly and blindingly as God did with Saul; or slowly turning the sound up, as God did with Ananias who heard what he really didn't want to hear (go and visit the persecutor and welcome him into the family of the followers of the Jesus he had been persecuting), and then doing just that. In the light of all of that, where might you see, or hear, God in your life this morning? What do you need to see? What do you need to hear?

Are you at a crossroads, in a relationship with a child or parent, or an almost relationship with someone you should love, or should not love? Is it about a job, or a colleague, or a decision about what you should do with the rest of your life, or about where you should live, or about the kind of person you need to become?

Many people experience God in exactly these crossroads, crucible moments. Some of it is earth-shattering and life-transforming – like it was for Saul. Some of it is a slow burn getting brighter, and a background noise getting louder and you gradually become aware of what you ought to do next, as it was for Ananias.

It gave him the understanding that he needed to go to this man Saul, whom he feared, whom he didn't trust, whom he didn't like, and no longer call him, "*this man*", but "*Brother Saul*". Ananias realised what God was prompting him to do; and did it. Saul, on a different journey, heard that welcome, and scales fell from his eyes, and he started on a road that led him to be one of the first great Christian missionaries.

One man continued on the way of faith; another man suddenly found himself turned around and on a different road of faith. But both saw, both heard, both responded, in their own way, in their own context, in their own time.

We know what happened to Saul, who became Paul. But I often wonder what happened to Ananias. On the Street called Straight, which is still there to this day in Damascus. It's a real place. What did Ananias' friends say when they crowded round him and asked, "Well, what happened?" Were there those first, awkward meetings with the new convert, with suspicion, curiosity, thanksgiving that somehow, though nobody could quite get their heads round the how or why, God had done something.

One of the reasons I became a Christian was because my faith helps me think about these questions; and when I read the Bible, things jump out and make me ask questions about myself, about my what I believe, and about the world in which I live. Reading this story today, and applying its meaning to our world, where are the Road to Damascus experiences needed now?

For Vladimir Putin, and his cruel-hearted destruction of Ukraine and so many of its people, and his own?

For some British politicians, in whichever party, who appear to believe that dishonesty, and living untruths, or unacceptable behaviour, or supporting policies that harm refugees, or damage the freedom of broadcasting, or leave people having to make choices about heating or eating, or not being transparent about contracts around building ferries, or leaving local roads with barriers that many do not want, or expecting charities to fill growing gaps where health care funding, or foodbank funding, or social care funding grow daily wider.

For companies and industries that underpay workers, or summarily dismiss them. Or exploit vulnerable children, women, and men in far-away sweatshops.

Roads to Damascus run all over our country and world for them. And they run all around us, for we too are being challenged to see, and hear, and think, and change.

Maybe when we get to the end of our Road to Damascus, and find ourselves perplexed and alone on a Street called Straight, someone might come to us and say, 'Sister, Brother, regain your sight. God's here to help, get up, and be strengthened for the next journey along your road.' See the light. Listen for the voice.

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

Amen