

Acts 9:1-20**True sight**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story of Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is one of the most dramatic conversion stories in the whole of scripture. Firstly, it's made quite clear that he's the bad guy. Then he's struck down with light. Then a voice speaks even though no one's around. And then Saul is blinded until he comes to realise the truth of who Jesus is.

I think the only comparable story is that of Moses and the burning bush. God is present as fire or light. God speaks even though no one is visibly present. God calls the person by name twice. And both stories turn out to be life-changing events for Saul and for Moses. But even more importantly, both stories bring big changes for God's people. God sends Moses to free his people from bondage in Egypt. God sends Saul to proclaim the gospel message to the gentiles. Both were unlikely messengers of God's will.

When we look at the early descriptions of Saul, before this dramatic encounter, we see a man devoted to God and trying to protect the faith. At this point in history, the Christians, those who were called followers of the Way, were still Jews who gathered in the synagogue. The difference being that the Christians believed Jesus was God's fulfilment of a promised Messiah.

This label as followers of the Way is quite a powerful metaphor for our Christian identity. Instead of primarily being identified by a set of beliefs, the community of believers were known by how they lived in the world. Faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah, as the saviour who defeated sin and death on the cross, was a way of life, not just a private belief. Followers of the Way were those who lived out their faith, who showed that Jesus was truly alive through his church.

However, Saul sees these followers of Jesus as those within his own faith needing rescue from their error. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and lived their lives differently because of those, but for Saul that just wasn't right. He asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus that will give him authority to conduct his policing there, to clean up his own faith community and rid it of these sheep that have gone astray. As far as Saul is concerned, this is not a matter of going after people just to persecute them, but rather to stamp out those who are following a false Messiah. He is a committed son of the covenant, a true Israelite, trying to do the right thing in order to strengthen the people of God.

Saul is the classic example of the devout person who is so determined to do good that they are blinded, literally in his case, to the destructive consequences of their actions. He does much harm as he is trying to do good. But then Jesus intervenes. And what happens next is not so much a conversion, even though we always call this story the conversion of Saul, but a greater understanding of the will of God. Saul wasn't converted from unbelief to belief. He was already a believer in the one true God. But he could not see that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God.

In order to receive true sight, he is first blinded, and then through Ananias, his sight is restored. It's only then that he sees the truth of who Jesus is, and begins proclaiming in the synagogues that he is the Son of God. Now it's worth noting that God didn't change his name from Saul to Paul. This is not like the story of Abram, whom God renamed Abraham, meaning 'Father of many'. And it's not like Jacob, who wrestled with God and was then renamed Israel, meaning 'He strives with God'. In Saul's case, he already had two names. Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was his Greek name. This is much like many immigrants to Australia who choose an Anglicised name to use among people who would probably butcher the pronunciation of their actual name. We see this same pattern of dual names with Thomas, also called Didymus, and Matthew, also called Levi. For Saul, we see him called Paul much more regularly during his missionary journeys where he is among the gentiles. So, in predominately Jewish territory he is called Saul, his Hebrew name, and in predominately Greek and Roman territory he is called Paul, his Greek name.

I mention this for two reasons. One, is that it's a common misconception and it's always good for us to have a true understanding of scripture. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it reminds us that Paul was basically the same as any other Jewish person who lived outside of Judea. He lived in two worlds at once and had to navigate his faith through a complex and at times hostile society.

So, although he is much like every other Israelite living outside of Judea, his story, his encounter with Jesus, shows us that, at times, God works directly and in quite dramatic ways. But in this same story we see that God also works through means, through the body of Christ, the church. God works through ordinary people like Saul, like Ananias, like you, and like me. Every follower of the Way, every Christian, every member of the body of Christ is the means through which the risen Lord Jesus is present in the world today. Many of us might feel like we're unsuited to this, unlikely messengers for such an important message. But that simply puts us in the same company as Saul and Moses and Jeremiah and so many others throughout scripture.

Whatever we think of our own ability to share the message, it is still true that Jesus is alive, and he calls us to continue to follow him. He is the only one worthy of our worship. As we heard in Revelation, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!" So let us pray that through the Holy Spirit we too may live as followers of the Way, proclaiming the truth of who Jesus is in both our words and our deeds. And may we trust that God can and does use anyone to further his will in this world, including you. And in this way, may others come to see the truth of who Jesus is, turning to him in faith, and receiving the gift of eternal life that he won for us on the cross. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.