

All Saints Talk for Sunday 1st Sept 2024

Spread the Word, Catch the Fire

'Seeing the Light' Tom Yacomeni

Saul's Conversion Acts 9v1-19

Acts 9v1-9 Saul's Conversion

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he 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." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Mims and I have had a lovely time away so thank you to the amazing team here for giving us space to rest. We spent the last couple of weeks at our favourite spot on the Mawdach estuary in North Wales and one morning we decided to walk from our caravan along the coast to Fairbourne. I spotted an excellent shortcut so in true Tom style I led Mims confidently along a sheep path through some trees, bracken and gorse intending to cut a corner and re-join the main path a bit further along. Unfortunately, as often seems to happen with my cunning diversions, the path seemed to peter out and we ended up hemmed in between rocks, bog and barbed wire. So with my tail between my legs, Mims had to lead us back the way we came and the episode was filed under the growing volume of Tom's dodgy walk experiences.

Have you ever been on a journey and realised you were actually going in totally the wrong direction? Or have you ever had to change your mind about something because you received some new information that cast the situation in a completely different light?

Well as we heard in our bible reading today from Acts, when Saul of Tarsus 'saw the light' he experienced such fundamental brain reversal that he couldn't see or communicate for several days afterwards. Psychologists might suggest that his experience was so intense and traumatic that his autonomic nervous system went into what's called immobility or dissociation mode and he froze to protect his brain from meltdown.

But if you think about it this was not some trivial change of mind. This was a world-changing event. In this one moment, Saul was transformed from a violent, scheming zealot to a compassionate servant and exponent of Christ. His whole mindset, ideology and way of life were turned completely upside down, and his renewed thinking went on to change the world as he unlocked the mysteries of salvation through faith in Jesus and instructed the early church about discipleship.

Although people sometimes talk about having a 'Road to Damascus' experience when they come to a fresh realisation in their thinking, this wasn't that simple. Saul wasn't won over by fresh insight or logic. He actually thought he was serving God by rounding up and imprisoning dangerous heretics from this dodgy Christian sect who were undermining the law of Moses. He had grown up in strict Jewish orthodoxy. He had studied the Torah under an influential Rabbi called Gamaliel. He was part of the fundamentalist sect of the Pharisees. He was a proper Zionist nationalist.

But like most people, Saul wasn't won for Christ by any argument, but by an encounter with the living Lord.

God chose to meet Saul on the road to Damascus and this encounter turned him around 180 degrees to a completely new life, a new family and new calling as the missionary known as the Apostle Paul.

God is still calling and radically transforming people today, and I think that over this coming season we will here more and more stories of people encountering Jesus and seeing their lives profoundly changed as they receive the Holy Spirit and start living for him.

My Dad shared with me recently that he was pretty much an atheist when he got a scholarship to Oxford to study Latin and Greek. When he got there, he was a bit gutted to discover that there were so many people there who were smarter than him and he had something of a crisis of confidence. But he also discovered that among these bright people there were some Christians who were offering something he didn't have – a living faith in the Lord Jesus along with a sense of purpose to their lives. He then remembered an occasion years earlier when he had found himself drawn to go along to go into a church when he was 11 years old and being completely mystified at all that was going on. Nevertheless, that experience stayed with him. God didn't give up on him and clearly kept prodding him. He then met my mum who was also a Christian at the university they devoted their lives to serving God. They still leading Bible studies together faithfully every week for residents of their retirement complex! In December this year he will have been ordained 64 years.

So whether you are 11 years old, in your 20s or retired, God has a wonderful plan for your life. I wonder in what way God might be prodding you this morning?

When he was on Trial before Agrippa in Caesarea, Paul described his experience on the road to Damascus in more detail and he adds that he heard Jesus say 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*' This seems a strange expression to our ears, but it is referring to cattle being goaded or prodded to keep moving and get back in line. Naturally oxen sometimes kick out against the goads. Clearly Saul had been resisting the truth and his zeal to justify himself meant he became more and more violent. But something must have been happening subconsciously. Sometimes it is those who appear most resistant who go through the greatest transformation. I remember a chap who was a postman who came to the first session of Alpha. The first thing he said was 'well what do you say to someone who just thinks the whole thing is just a load of ****!' He went on to have a brilliant testimony and was a wonderful servant of the Lord.

Saul was the one who stood guard over the pharisees' cloaks giving his approval to the stoning of Stephen. He must have heard how Stephen had called the Jewish rulers stiff necked for not believing the good news of Jesus. Perhaps it was Stephen's testimony and witness that had lodged itself deep into Saul's soul, becoming the suppressed seeds of his calling to follow Jesus.

The most wonderful thing about this story is that even if you have been travelling in completely the wrong direction with your life, consciously or subconsciously going against the will of God, living full of anger, hatred, hurt or confusion, you are never beyond the reach and call of God. If God can transform savage Saul into patient Paul, then his grace is sufficient for you too. In fact, Paul later wrote to the Corinthian church that God says "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

If you think you are beyond help, not good enough or somehow living outside God's best will and purpose for your life then God's message to you today is this – come back to him. Be reconciled, be forgiven and be part of God's family again.

So today as we begin a new season in the Life of this community of All Saints, God wants to encounter us and transform us. Maybe he has a new calling and direction he wants to show you. You may not be a missionary apostle like Paul but today's passage also includes 2 other people who responded to God's call.

The first is Ananias, who is a massive hero in my book. We don't know much about him except that the text just says he was 'a disciple'. In other words he was an ordinary guy, not an apostle, not a prophet, he didn't have a special title. But he had open ears to hear the Lord.

The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"
"Yes, Lord," he answered.

Fantastic! Ananias was alert enough to recognise the voice of the Lord. Unlike Saul who said 'who are you Lord?', Ananias didn't query it – he was ready to listen. "Yes, Lord."

Have we got open ears to hear God calling us today? Are we looking to God's Word to lead us? Sometimes we get a challenging task. Ananias got a terrifying task. How would you like to be told to go and pray for an assassin who is out to get you? I don't blame him at all for kicking back a bit. But when God said Go! He went.

He was told to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. It's a great detail – Straight Street is a couple of miles long still there in Damascus.

We don't know which house belonged to Judas but he gets a mention, because he opened his home to Saul and let him stay there after his blinding encounter. Judas responded to God's call for hospitality.

So this story not only shows how God encounters us as individuals, but also how the church is to respond to grow and nurture those who come to faith.

Judas opened up his home to Saul, Ananias leads him gently into the family of the church and discipleship.

What a beautiful way to address a man who might have arrested and imprisoned the Christians in Damascus.

Placing his hands on Saul, he 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."

Brother Saul. What amazing healing words of welcome, acceptance and encouragement right there. Brothers and Sisters, it is an incredible privilege to be part of God's family together. Ananias didn't hold back, He just loved him and welcomed him wholeheartedly. We can do the same with each other and with our wider community here in Weston.

Our mission as a church is this: to share the life and message of Jesus with everyone in Weston, Bath and beyond. Sharing means not just words but actions. Just imagine if we could share Ananias' words with someone from your community this week who may be feeling lost or hurting. 'The Lord Jesus has sent me that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit'.

So whether you are like Saul, in need of life changing grace, or Ananias with ears open to the Lord, or like Judas, willing to open his home for the Lord's work, God is calling all of us in this new season. 3 times in this passage God says Go!

So can we consider ourselves sent?

Let's Go...