



**Rev Helen Jacobi**

**Call of Saul**

Year C Easter 3

Acts 9:1-20

John 21:1-14

1 May 2022

Have you ever used or heard the phrase “a road to Damascus experience” or “a road to Damascus moment”?

A moment where things have suddenly changed and your life is upended or redirected.

It could be falling in love; or travelling to a new place; or when a loved one dies; or the birth of a child.

That phrase – the road to Damascus – comes from our first reading we heard today; from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles - accounts of the experiences of the followers of Jesus in the early years of the church.

This Easter season we get a series of readings about different people – today it is Saul (or Paul), next week Tabitha, then Peter, then Lydia and then Paul and Silas.

Snapshots of their life and faith.

Today’s snapshot is about Saul, who we mostly know as Paul, the Greek version of his Jewish name.

Paul who goes on to write the letters to the Corinthians, Romans and so on that make up a lot of the NT.

Here he is Saul, from Tarsus (in Turkey), a Jewish Roman citizen, a traveller, well educated, and very concerned for the wellbeing of the Jewish people spread across the Roman world.

So concerned that he is alarmed by this new group that has sprung up within Judaism – the people of “the Way” – as the followers of Jesus were known.

In Jerusalem and elsewhere followers of Jesus are being excluded from the synagogues and persecuted.

Stephen is stoned and Saul we are told “approved of their killing him.” (Acts 8:1)

Saul is a fundamentalist, so certain of his own beliefs that he will act with violence towards those who believe something else.

We know what that looks like, and has looked like, down through the centuries.

Saul is on the road to Damascus, travelling from Jerusalem – a 4 hour drive today, except of course today you wouldn’t be able to cross the border from Palestine/ Israel into Syria.

Fundamentalist violence has made very sure of that.

Saul is on the road nearing Damascus and he sees a bright light, hears a voice which says “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

The light is so bright he cannot see and his travelling companions help him into the city where he stays 3 days, and eats and drinks nothing.

Yes, we are supposed to think – like Jesus in the desert, or Jesus in the tomb.

After 3 days, a follower of Jesus, Ananias, rather reluctantly (because he has heard of Saul’s violence) goes to Saul, prays with him and baptises him.

And Saul joins the people of the Way and begins his new travels, with a new purpose teaching and preaching about Jesus.

At some point in his travels he starts being known as Paul (Acts 13:9) which was the Greek version of his name.

As we noted in our Easter readings we have to be careful of the threads of anti Jewish thought hidden here.

This account is often called “Paul’s conversion,” the moment he renounced his Jewish faith and became a Christian.

But in the early years there was no “Christianity” as we know it now, the people of the Way were faithful Jews who wanted to explore a new understanding of God in the life and teachings of Jesus. Paul didn’t “convert”- he continued to believe in the same God; he just stopped his horrendous acts of violence towards other believers.

Paul was called on the road to Damascus to change his ways and to embrace a new way, a new way of being.

It was a dramatic call but he needed something dramatic to stop him in his steps and renounce violence and persecution.

He would go on to call others to a similar path when he would write about there being no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.

Paul would forever call people to be part of the body of Christ and not destroy each other over difference.

So if we really want to use that term - a road to Damascus experience – it would more accurately describe a time in our lives when we have caught ourselves being racist, or sexist, or making assumptions about another group of people.

A time when we have stopped ourselves making a nasty comment on social media; or pulled a friend or workmate up for a similar comment.

In covid times we have had so many false narratives and conspiracy theories and we have seen people fall down those rabbit holes. We can reach out and help them have their Damascus moment where the scales fall from their eyes and they see clearly again. We won’t do that by dismissing them or yelling on social media, we will do that by being Ananias who was prepared to step over the barrier of fear and reach out.

And prepared to examine his own behaviour and motives before criticising the motives of others.

Being a follower of Jesus, like Paul, or Peter and the other fishermen in our gospel reading, or Tabitha and Lydia coming up soon, being a

follower is all about being in relationship and connection with each other.

Being willing to look inside ourselves and be challenged by the demands of the gospel, and to rely on each other for help on the way.

The moment we drift into a fundamentalist certainty that we are right and others are wrong is the moment we will see the Damascus Road boarded up with barriers and checkpoints, armies on the move in Ukraine, and friends lost to us in the swirl of conspiracy theories.

How can we remain open and humble?

Our first step always is gathering as we are today, around the table, being fed like the disciples on the beach, ready to be sent out on the road.