
¹ Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.... ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?' ⁵ He asked, 'Who are You, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting....' ¹³ But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem...' ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring My name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I Myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name.'

From Acts 9:1-20 (NRSV)

What does it mean to love someone, or to love something? We do not need to have a long conversation during a sermon in this regard, as indeed it would be a long conversation, as also something that has been explored on many an occasion in the life of the Church. We hear that "God is love." We know Christ's call to "love one another." We are given many examples and words about this in the Bible. But later today, or if you are reading this manuscript now, spend some time in talking with those near you about what it means to "love them". What does it mean to love someone, or to love something?

Whilst it may not be apparent at first, today's reading about the conversion of Saul also deals with the theme of love, and what to do with a broken heart. As we work through the text, we will pick up this theme. But...

In our world today, and in our common experience of life, we often think that 'time will heal all wounds'. However, as one person once told me with regard to a difficult experience, 'You don't get over it, you just get used to it'. In our reading today there is mention of a number of people who went through very difficult experiences...

But each of these situations demonstrate that, for true change to occur (and a 'new heart') God must also be involved in the situation. But how does this work...? Let's recall our text....

At the beginning of Acts 9 we hear that "Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..." To understand this Saul we need to remember at the murder of the first Christian (Saint Stephen), Saul was one of the ring-leaders. Acts 7:58 records that, those who stoned Stephen to death 'placed their cloaks at Saul's feet'. This means Saul was one of the organisers of this.

Even more fascinating is that, Acts 22:3, in a speech recorded of Paul, he stated he was once a student of Gamaliel. Gamaliel was the one who said the Jewish council should let the Apostles go because (Acts 5:38-39): “If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men”. Gamaliel called for ‘tolerance’. However, it seems that Saul was quite zealous for his religion.

One can imagine what those first Christians were thinking when Paul was ‘breathing out threats of murder’. There was probably a prayer-meeting or two with Saul as the central topic of prayer. Most likely some would have prayed for some ‘divine intervention’ to ‘stop Saul’: maybe some ‘accident’, with ‘God’s judgment’ to be brought to bear. Possibly some (maybe many) would have prayed for the ‘conversion’ of Saul. But the question is this: would many prayers have been prayed out of love for Saul? Were those praying concerned for self, or Saul?

At one level this is a hypothetical question: we do not know what the disciples were thinking. At another level this is not a hypothetical question – when we do take into consideration our realm of human experience. When someone ‘does something bad to us’ we often ‘think of ourselves’. [However, a love of Saul would not mean people would want him to continue in murderous ways].

The ‘good news’ is that God broke into Saul’s life with a ‘blinding experience’. And, after this significant event, he spent three days in prayer and reflection. God had given Saul faith in this ‘light’ (“Who are You, Lord?” Saul asked: Acts 9:5). However, in the days following, Saul would have reflected on what this means for him: would he ‘accept this’ (ie: live by it?), or would he ‘reject it’ (ie: continue in his ‘old ways’?). Finally, three days later (!), when Ananias came to the house, ‘something like scales fell from his eyes’, he was baptised, he ate bread (!), and ‘For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’

But not everyone ‘believed Saul’ (this ‘wild-living person). Ananias himself was hesitant to visit Saul (as the Acts of the Apostles/ Spirit also later testifies). Paul was a ‘changed person’, as demonstrated by his action. But it took a while for many people (Christians and non-Christian) to appreciate this (as we could understand). And whilst Saul’s ‘conversion’ was ‘dramatic’, it was also a ‘process’ (in that there were three days of reflection before ‘the scales went from the eyes’, and baptism. And whilst he went into Synagogues and Jerusalem to proclaim ‘Jesus as Lord’, it was over three years before Saul (now named Paul) began his Apostolic mission into the world.

What may we learn from Saul’s conversion?

First, can Jesus really change a person's life? We say 'Yes'. The God who fashioned the stars and the universe has the power to bring great change.

There is a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon that goes like this:

Calvin, 'If people sat outside and looked at the stars each night, I'd bet they'd live a lot differently'. Hobbes responds: 'How so?' Calvin then says: 'Well, when you look into infinity, you realise that there are more important things than what people do all day'. Can 'God' change a person's life? Yes! But 'the place' to 'begin change' is within one's own self.

One of the greatest challenges for the first Christians was to accept that Saul had changed. This is understandable. But over time this became more evident as Saul's deeds matched his words. He lived by faith in Jesus.

When the risen Lord Jesus met with His disciples (as we hear in the Gospel today: John 21:1-19), three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" (Three, in Hebrew, signifies completion. Three witnesses are required at trial to verify something. Three days and you are really dead). Three times Jesus asked to remind Peter of the true love in his heart.

Jesus had 'forgiven Peter'. He always had forgiveness to Peter – even on the cross (after all, that is what the cross of Jesus is all about: forgiveness!). But Peter had not yet 'accepted' that 'forgiveness' within himself. You can almost hear his 'hurt' when, after Jesus asked the third time 'Do you love Me?', Peter said, "Lord, You know everything. You know that I love You."

As Paul (formerly known as Saul) later reflected on life, he said (Philippians 1:21), "For me, to live, is Christ". He also said (Galatians 2:20): "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

Paul was a 'radical' (and a sinner!) who learnt a new way to love – in Jesus. Jesus brings great change to people. Saul's 'salvation' was an act of divine grace. And Saul's 'conversion' was a radical change. It was not an 'evolution of belief, but a revolution of belief'. It was not a transition, but a transformation. It was a miraculous, dramatic reversal, first of one's beliefs, and then of one's behaviour.

Paul, through the work of the Holy Spirit, came to know he was 'made to live, made to love, and made to know Jesus'. Paul, through the work of the Holy Spirit, came to know he was not made to 'live for himself', but to 'live for Christ'. And this was also a journey for his fellow believers – for you and I...

In Jerusalem – prior to Saul's 'conversion' – undoubtedly many hearts were 'broken' at the terrible things they had seen (as you and I know 'broken hearts, with faith in the Lord). In our world there are people who have experienced the death of loved ones.

There are those who experience the pain of relationship trials and difficulties. There are those who have experienced shocking abuse at the hands of others. And there are those who struggle with 'sin' and personal 'demons'. But God has the power to change....

How shall we 'love one another', and 'love all in the world'...? This is an important question... Love, of course, does not mean we ever 'tolerate sin' (as the account of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5; or the 'conversion' of Saul both demonstrate). But, as we look into the difficult situations we often see in life, we are called to have a 'heart of love'. And this 'love' is not meant to come from 'within our own selves' (which is, by nature, 'sinful'). Rather, we are to focus on the love that comes from God in Jesus, who can (and does) 'change everything'.

Beyond doubt Ananias is one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian Church. If it be true that the Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen, it is also true that the Church owes Paul to the brotherliness of Ananias. To Ananias came a message from God that he must go and help Paul; and he is directed to the street called "Straight." When that message came to Ananias it must have sounded mad to him. He might well have approached Paul with suspicion, as one doing an unpleasant task; he might well have begun with recriminations; but no; his first words were, "Brother Saul." What a welcome was there! It is one of the sublimest examples of Christian love. That is what Christ can produce.

Corrie ten Boom (famous from WW II, and her book 'The Hiding Place) once said, "Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, and receives the impossible." Her sister, Betsie, just before she died in a concentration camp in 1944 said, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still." God has the power to use 'broken people' to share hope to a 'broken world'.

It is Jesus' power which changes Paul not something in himself. It is Jesus' power which changes the community to be able to welcome Paul. It is Jesus' power today which transforms our lives in ways subtle and profound. Saul's life was radically 'turned around'. He wanted his life, then, to be 'proof' of God's love. And as believers in Jerusalem received a wonderful gift, the gift of Saul, so we can rejoice in the radical change Jesus brings into our lives. Amen.