

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 29th January 2023

Acts 9: 1 - 22

2 Corinthians 11: 23 -32

Mark 1: 21 - 28

The Conversion of Paul (Saul)

Good Morning - Welcome everybody, here in church and on Zoom, it's good to be back, speaking in person.

Some of you may have noticed that I changed the readings and our theme this week, because Wednesday was the day, in the C of E, when we celebrated the Conversion of Paul, or Saul as he was then known; and I thought we really should have a look at this remarkable story, and some of the results.

But first, as usual, I'd like to find out what struck you about our readings today, and any questions they may have raised.... Thank you

Paul's (or Saul as he was originally known) story is one of remarkable redemption, which shows categorically that God can and will redeem anyone who accepts His call and follows Him. It also shows just how God can and will use any person, or situation for His purpose, if they will listen to Him and do what He asks them to do

Paul's persistent missionary work, his faithfulness and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, together with the hardships he endured in order to proclaim the Gospel, are quite amazing; and provide us with powerful examples of how to depend on the Holy Spirit in tough times. Sadly, he was martyred in Rome around AD 46 during the rule of Emperor Nero.

However, I have a bit of a love / hate relationship with Paul. The stories of his travels, his determination and his persistence are wonderful; but I find his writings and his letters are often really hard to digest, because they're sometimes so convoluted. He frequently had a habit of using 20 words, when 2 may well have been enough! That's one of the reasons I like to use the Message translation, because it often puts Paul's thoughts into more manageable language.

So, first, let's explore what is often called Paul's 'Damascus Road experience' and what happened next. From **Acts 9: 1 - 22 (from 'The Message')**

I wonder what you took from the reading, because there's a lot of action, in relatively few lines??

At first glance, Saul seems like a really nasty piece of work; he'd obtained permission from the Chief Priest to bring members of 'The Way' (followers of Jesus) to trial for blasphemy; there is evidence that he was present at the stoning to death of Stephen.

Paradoxically, Saul was a very highly educated, passionately God fearing man - in fact, he was almost a religious fanatic. There's no doubt he honestly believed he was doing God's work (protecting the religious tradition he'd been raised and educated in).

As an aside, we need to pray that we never stumble into that kind of dangerous misconception; worrying about our own traditions and practices, rather than being open to new things God may be calling us to do. (That kind of misconception is common in history - for example, Oliver Cromwell, or the Crusaders spring to mind).

We must be sure to be open to God's way; and to listen out carefully for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and accept His guidance..

As we read this passage, it's clear God urgently wanted to redeem and redirect Saul; and to rechannel and make use of his passionate energy in the right direction.

Our reading tells us that God caught Saul's attention, literally bringing him to his knees; and then helped him see the light of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus - and the healing Jesus brings!

Saul came face to face with his saviour, his redeemer, his Lord - our saviour, our redeemer, our Lord - Jesus Christ.

Saul's question; 'Who are you, Master?' received an interesting response 'I am Jesus, **the One** you're hunting down.(definite GOD language)' Immediately after this meeting Saul repented (turned around, changed direction).

Saul was totally blind for **3 Days** (is that time significant - an act of resurrection??) Saul fasted; Saul was redeemed and Saul was redirected. We'll look at that a bit more in a minute.

There's another story woven in here. Along the way, God used Ananias to minister to Saul - it's the only time Ananias is ever mentioned in the NT; but He too was open to the Lord's challenging call, and did most important work for the spread of the Gospel.

His willingness (if reluctant at first) to obey the Master's call, enabled the Holy Spirit to

work powerfully through him to heal and redirect Saul. (Think what resulted from Annanias's simple obedience - all of Paul's missionary work to the Gentiles and planting and encouraging churches wherever he went.)

It's worth reflecting here for a moment. We may not all be intrepid missionaries like Paul; but God does have a purpose and a role for every one of us, IF we are willing to listen to Him and to do His will.

You may not feel either able or equipped to head out into the overseas mission field, (I didn't either!) but your support, your prayers and your openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit can be an equally vital piece in the cosmic jigsaw of God's work.

What an amazing powerhouse Ananias released when he prayed for Saul to regain his sight, and those scales fell off - Paul started preaching the Gospel, the Good news of Jesus, almost immediately.

It's not really surprising, is it, that people who knew of, or had experienced his past history, were more than a little uncertain about working with Paul initially.

Our second reading (From Paul's second letter to the Corinthians), introduces us to Paul's description of some of the challenges he went through to proclaim the Gospel.

He certainly did not have an easy life. He travelled wherever the Holy Spirit led him, all around the Mediterranean countries, including Cyprus, Crete and Malta, and all over what is now Greece and Turkey, and several visits to Rome, telling people the Good News about Jesus.

(Although on a number of occasions the Holy Spirit quite clearly directed Paul and his team away from some places and, wisely, they didn't go)

It must have been a really challenging culture shock for someone who was a strict Pharisaic Jew like Paul, to be called upon to serve Jesus, whom he now recognised as the Messiah, and to find himself working mainly among Gentiles.

Not everyone wanted to accept the news Paul was proclaiming (just like Paul himself, initially!) But he didn't give up.

Whenever I feel my work is difficult, I give thanks I haven't had to deal with the experiences Paul had, in many of the places he visited: five floggings from the Jews, three beatings from the Romans, a stoning nearly to death. As well as three

shipwrecks, and a day and night immersed in the open sea, and often having to cross

rivers and deal with all kinds of adverse weather.

He also had to hide and escape on many occasions, fending off robbers and disagreeing with both enemies and friends. (I'm pretty sure his almost fanatical determination must have been really difficult to live with).

On top of all that, some of the time, in between his preaching and teaching, he made and sold tents, to provide himself with an income! (That was the harsh reality of a self supporting ministry.) Finally, as I said earlier, he was martyred in Rome in AD 46.

I have to say, Paul's story leaves me feeling exhausted. There are loads of amazing tales in Paul's writings in the New Testament, which are well worth reading, and can teach us so much. We'll be looking at some more of them later in the year.

But now, as I close, let me leave you with a question to reflect on this week: 'Do you think you a Paul or an Ananias??'

Either way, the Lord has valuable work for you to do. We simply have to be open, allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and through us; and we will be amazed by what the Lord can do!

Let's Pray ... **Amen**