

'Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 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. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' (Acts 9:1-5)

What are we to make of this? We have here as the subject one of the most violent oppressors of the early church, indeed one of those who, in Acts 7, stood by at the stoning of the first Christian saint, Stephen. He not only stood by but approved this murderous action to the extent that other lookers-on showed their approval of him. We know this because the text says:

'The witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.' (v.58)

Ch 8:2-3 continues the narrative:

'And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.'

Let us make no mistake. Saul hated this new Christian movement, known as 'The Way'.

He hated it because, it seemed to him that these followers of the one called the Christ, were seeking to destroy everything that the Jewish religion stood for: the exultation of the Torah, God's Law and the good estate of all those who, like himself worshipped God through ritual and sacrifices laid down in the Law since the time it was given to Moses.

Saul, on the outside strove to keep every letter of the Law and so strict was he in his fanatic endeavour, he could easily persuade himself that this was the case on the inside too, and, he made sure that everyone else knew that this was so.

So far, so good. As our opening verses stated: 'Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 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.'

Oh yes, he was determined that he was going to go down in history, as the man who saved the Jewish religion from this band of vagabonds and misfits. What he didn't count on was the leader of this group of rogues turning up when he least expected it, to shine a light on the figure of Saul himself, to the extent that, all of a sudden, he was brought face to face with his own true self and had to make a decision.

'As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?''

Can you picture the scene? Saul is a determined man. Nothing is going to get in his way, and yet, this light was so powerful that it made him stumble to the ground as if in submission. Saul had never experienced anything like this. He was the one that caused people to stumble, but now it was his turn.

And then the words: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' The boot of fear is completely on the other foot. Surely, like everyone, Saul has had knock-backs in his profession career and personal life, but nothing like this. Who could be causing Saul this much anxiety?

'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' Saul, who cannot see where the voice is coming from, can only mutter: 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Now let us just stop here a moment. Saul is the one who says 'Who are you, Lord?' We can draw from this that Saul recognises that whatever it is that is happening to him, it is out of the ordinary, supernatural. The intensely bright light, the voice asking him, 'Why do you persecute me?' this doesn't happen in normal life.

This is an extraordinary happening. Is this an angel? The Cherubim and seraphim from Isaiah's vision in Isaiah Ch.6 perhaps? Could it even be Satan? Saul doesn't know, but there is one thing he does know: whoever this person is, they have a far greater power than anything Saul himself could muster in response. Therefore, best to address him as such, so he says: 'Who are you, Lord?'

I wonder what Saul would have replied, if Jesus had asked him: 'And who are you?'. We know what Saul would have said, as Saul, now the Apostle Paul, tells us in Philippians Ch.3:

'If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.'

Indeed, in 1 Timothy 1:12-15 he goes further:

'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.' (NIV)

There is no messing around here. Paul understands, looking back, how bad he was; how much he had sinned against the Lord, even when he thought he was doing the right thing. The Lord decided to pull him down to the ground, in order that he might be raised up in faith. Paul continues in 1 Timothy 1:

'But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.' 1 Timothy 1:16-17)

In asking 'Who are you Lord?', Saul received the reply that opened his eyes to God's glory: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. 'I am' alone will have got Saul's attention. Was it not Moses, who, when asking God on the Hebrew's behalf, enquired by what name he should be called, received the reply: 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.' The further name, 'Jesus', nailed it home and gave Paul a personal introduction to the Lord.

Saul knew who he was speaking with alright. It changed his life:

'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have

suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.’ (Phil.3:4-10)

From the worst of sinners to the greatest acclaimer of the name of Jesus, in one day is quite a journey. It can happen to anyone. It can happen to you. All one has to ask is: ‘Who are you, Lord?’