

1 May 2022 Acts 9:1-6 3 Easter Pastor Fraser Pearce

Have you ever heard someone else's faith journey,
And thought, 'I wish I'd experienced the things *they've* experienced?'
'*They've* experienced God in a way that is direct and powerful,
While *my* experiences of God seem mundane and unimpressive.
They seem to be full of confidence in God,
While *I* am full of doubts and weaknesses.'
If you've ever felt this way, then I have Good News
To proclaim from God's word today:
While everyone *does* have their own path of faith,
And while different people *do* have different experiences of God,
The risen Lord Jesus has given us the one gift of Holy Baptism,
So that we do not need to envy the spiritual life of others,
Or be disappointed with the gifts that God has given us.
Rather, we are free to trust without doubt
That through baptism into Christ our sins are forgiven,
And that we can call on the name of the Lord
Knowing that he will hear us,
And help us in our doubt and weakness.

Let's get into today's reading from Acts: **Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...**

OK, let's pause right there: '**Meanwhile**' the text says.

What's been going on?

Well the last time we heard about Saul in the text

-And Saul and Paul is the same person, by the way,

One way to think about it is that Saul is the Hebrew version

And Paul the Roman version of his name –

The last time we heard about Saul was also the first time

That he comes up in the narrative.

Stephen, who has confessed

That he has seen Jesus at the right hand of God,

Becomes the first martyr of the church as he is stoned to death.

This is what we then read: **And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen]. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.**

So Saul, outraged by the apparent blasphemy of the first Christians is on the rampage.

Then, in Acts, we hear about Philip taking the Gospel to Samaria,
And preaching the Good News to the Ethiopian Eunuch,
And baptising him.

In other words, persecution does not hinder the progress of the Gospel
But acts as a kind of pressure that forces it out of Jerusalem.

Then we get to today's reading: **Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.**

It is Saul who has the idea to go to Damascus,
A place well to the north-east: So,
It's not only the persecuted but the persecutors who are driven out.
But Saul does not act on his own authority,
He gets letters from the high priest,
Giving him religious and political authority to arrest men and women:
To bind them, and bring them back to Jerusalem.

But it is as Saul is on his journey of persecution
That God intervenes: **Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I**

am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'

Here we have a dramatic and even threatening encounter with God,
With the risen Christ: Saul falls to the ground,
And he hears a voice calling him by name.

But did you notice anything unusual about the way that Saul is called?
The Lord calls his name *twice*.

We could easily overlook this detail,
But as we hear the Old Testament echo in our ears,
And especially those narratives where the Lord calls people
To a new path of action, then things become more interesting.

So think about this from when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac: **But the angel of the LORD called to [Abraham] from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.'** Genesis 22:11

Or think about this, when Jacob is about to go to Egypt: **God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, 'Jacob, Jacob.' And he said, 'Here I am.'** Genesis 46:2

Or think about this, when Moses encounters the Lord in the desert: **When the LORD saw that [Moses] had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'** Exodus 3:4

Or think about this, when the boy Samuel is in the temple: Then the LORD called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' 1 Samuel 3:4

Now we have the calling of Saul,
With the same duplication of his name:
The Lord is calling Saul onto a new path of life,
But Saul does not say 'Here I am', but 'Who are you, Lord?'
It is then that we hear the words that must have hit Saul
Like a bombshell: **'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'**

The name of the Lord is *Jesus*,
And the risen Lord tells Saul that in persecuting Christian people,
Saul is not only harming them, he is persecuting *Jesus*,
He is persecuting the Lord.

Think, dear Christian people, how closely your Lord
Associates himself with you,
Especially as you suffer because you bear his name.
And consider how the Lord chose Saul,
A persecutor of the church, to be his apostle.

Why the Lord chose Saul, the persecutor, to be an apostle
Is a mystery: the reason is in God's counsel,
But what Jesus chose Saul *for* is clear:
To suffer for his Lord's name; to proclaim the Gospel to the nations.
This can help us understand our own path of faith:
We may not know *why* the Lord has chosen *us* for the life of faith:
It certainly was not because we were better or more deserving
Than our family or friends or neighbours.
But we can know what our Lord chose us *for*,
As we reflect on the callings that we have,
And how we can live them out in fidelity to God's word.

What is surprising in today's reading
Is that the risen Lord gives Saul a simple task:
He, the Lord, and *not* the High Priest or Saul himself,
Sends Saul to Damascus,
And the risen Christ sends a person, Ananias, to meet Saul.
And this is what we hear as the chapter unfolds: **So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, Now Ananias had been fearful of Saul, Knowing that he was a persecutor of the church, But, in obedience to the Lord's command, He goes to see Saul and addresses him not as an enemy or a persecutor But as a brother: 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'** And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.
Saul's regaining of his sight, Saul's receiving of the Holy Spirit,

There are given by the Lord Jesus not in the direct encounter
On the way to Damascus, but *through the church*,
Through a *fearful but obedient Christian man*, Ananias.
More than this, in a detail that is easy to miss,
Saul is baptised.

The risen Lord Jesus, who appeared to Saul in a dramatic
And even a threatening way, sends Saul to receive that gift
That the Lord established in his resurrection,
And that is common calling of all Christian people,
The gift of baptism.

Now the account of Saul's conversion is given three times in Acts,
Today, from chapter 9, is the first time,
And is told from the point of view of the narrator, St Luke.
Then in chapter 22 St Paul tells the account
In Jerusalem to his fellow Jews.

Then, in chapter 26, St Paul again tells the account of his conversion
To secular authorities on his way to Rome.

In is in the second account that we hear these words: **[Ananias] said, "Brother Saul, regain your sight!" In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. Then he said, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name."** Acts 22

The second and central retelling has as its crescendo
Saul being told by the one the Lord Jesus had sent him to meet,
By the one the Lord had sent to see Saul,
It has Saul being told to get up, to be baptised
To have his sins washed away, and to call on the name of the Lord.

That's how it was for Saul, that great Apostle,
Whom God used to proclaim the Good News to all nations.

He was sent to receive the same gift that we have received,
The gift of Holy Baptism,
In which our sins have been washed away, and we have been freed
To call on the name of the Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
Each one of you have been called by the risen Lord Jesus,
You have been baptised into him,
Your sins have been washed away: you have a Lord who is near
To help you in doubt, to help you in weakness
As you call to him.

We do not need to envy the experiences of others,
Or to think that we are missing out if our path of faith
Seems less dramatic or impressive than that of others.
Instead , we are free to thank God for making us as we are,
For giving us the gifts he has given us,
And for giving us the callings that we have in life,
Even simple callings that may not seem impressive
From a worldly point of view, but that are seen by the Father in secret,
And, as our Lord says, the Father, who sees in secret,
Rewards us as we act in faith.

So let's live the faith that we have together received
Through our baptism into Christ,
A baptism that we share with St Paul,
And with all the people of God.
Let's live that faith to the glory of God.
In Jesus' name. Amen.