

## **Down the Damascus Road**

Acts 9:1-20

The Third Sunday of Easter\ Year C

April 18, 2010

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.**

Moments of disclosure- they happen all too rarely. Often after long periods of frustration and confusion, the light dawns, and what has been shrouded in darkness suddenly can be glimpsed- if only for an instant. Even though such a disclosure may only last as long as it takes us to breathe in and breathe out, the disclosure is nonetheless liberating. Freeing us to get on with our lives. Giving us a new sense of enthusiasm. It is not a matter of new information making all the difference, it is a matter of revelation, a matter of a gift coming from beyond ourselves.

The scriptures are filled with all manner of disclosures. One such disclosure happened to the disciples after a rather long and tedious night of unsuccessful fishing. They are weary and ready to finally beach their boat, when from across the shore a voice tells them to let down their nets on the right hand side. As they do so, they find an overwhelming catch of fish which quite naturally leads to speculation as to who had such insight into the waters. The beloved disciple discloses the revelation for all of them. "It is the Lord" he says. There are times in our own lives when we would echo his sentiments.

You know, all we have to do is take a casual stroll through the pages of the New Testament and we will uncover countless times when God's light seems to dawn in (or at least slide a ray or two past the door frame of) our hearts. Pontius Pilate hovered right on the edge of just such a moment when he asked Christ "What is truth". So did King Agrippa when he admitted, not only to Saint Paul but to himself, that the Christian message almost had him convinced. Almost. Nicodemus as well. You remember him. He was the Pharisee who would come to talk to Jesus under the cover of darkness. It would ultimately take the horror of the crucifixion to bring him finally out of the shadows. Once could argue that these are, not only, the less successful but certainly the less obvious moments of disclosure. Christ doesn't seem to pass muster for these people with the potential exception of Nicodemus. There are no wondrous or dramatic conversions from these Jesus encounters. But don't fear the Bible is full of those too. Thomas putting his hand in Christ's side, exclaiming "My Lord and My God" or the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross "Truly this man was the son of God". Their experiences of Christ petty much meant a dramatic "about-face" for their lives. That's what the word conversion means after all. And there is perhaps no greater story of conversion, particularly if you want one fraught with drama, than that of Saint Paul's. His rather disconcerting discovery not only of God but of himself on the Damascus road has captured our imaginations for generations.

In his former life, Paul was not a terribly agreeable fellow, nor was he particularly

known for his kind treatment or tolerance of others. By his own admission, he was a fearsome and almost rabid man who was controlled by a zealotry which would rival even some of our modern fundamentalists. For Saul, as Paul was known then, there was only one kind of faithful Jew in the world. His kind. And if you weren't his kind, then you weren't God's kind either. Saul was the self-appointed savior of Judaism, at least that's how he saw things. He had made a commitment, as much to himself as to the so-called Jerusalem authorities, to do everything within his power to weed out those who would undermine the faith. He would weed out the "enemies of God". And the most offensive of these enemies was a small group of people known as the "followers of the way" or Christians. They enjoyed a permanent position at the center of his radar. Even Saul's old teacher Gamaliel demonstrated more forbearance- He at least had heard Peter and the disciples out when they appeared before the Sanhedrin. If Saul had been in his place, they would have been thrown in shackles.

Saul is still spitting teeth about these Christians when he goes to the high priest seeking permission to launch a round-up, not in Jerusalem but Damascus. Apparently, Christians have been popping out of the woodwork there and he has no intention of allowing these "enemies of God" to continue teaching that some Galilean carpenter is the Messiah and rose from the dead. The High Priest avidly agrees and dispatches him post haste with letters of arrest to the rabbis of Damascus. His journey to the city is long and hard but he's looking forward to getting down to business. It is around high noon when Saul and his companions finally catch sight of the Damascus gate. Just a few more hills to cross and they will be there. The letters are firmly in Saul's pocket. His horse, dappled and gray, is doing well. Saul is doing well. He's in the middle of thinking about how best to coordinate the round-ups when wouldn't you know it- all heaven breaks loose. Blinding, searing light surrounds him. He falls and it feels as if he will fall forever. Only the slight pain in his shoulder from where it hit the road gives him any sense that he has stopped. As if this explosion of light isn't enough to get his attention, a voice booms out of the air. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

In a rather telling response, Saul cries "Who are you, Lord". It seems that Saul is starting to see the true nature of his predicament and that it might just be God who knocked him off his horse. After all, there are those walking around in the world who need God to do just that. Not to mention the fact, that those enemies of God Saul's always thinking about may be closer than he realizes. The enemy of God may even be himself. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" the Lord says. "Get up, Saul and enter the city. Once you're in town you'll be told what to do next." And so, Saul's "about face", his conversion into a follower of Jesus Christ, into Paul begins.

But you know, the strange thing is that Saul's traveling companions don't even wonder of what is taking place. They hear Jesus' voice, to be sure. It even makes them speechless. They look all over the road for its source but to no avail. But they simply do not see the "light" in the same way that Saul- becoming Paul- sees it. They remain curious but unmoved by the event which is winding its way through Saul's heart. Interesting how conversion is like that. An intensely personal experience of God which can more often than not confuse family, friends, coworkers and even fellow travelers on

the road who find it difficult to understand what is happening to us.

The change in Saul's life is at once striking and terrifying. He struggles to his feet. He straightens himself up. He opens his eyes and nothing. He's stone blind. His un-comprehending friends have to lead him by the hand to the city. Once there he's unable to eat or drink and even if he had been able others would have had to feed him. Saul, the man who thought he had cornered the market on truth, who had so actively pursued and rounded-up Christians is now helpless. Helpless as a little child. In this way he enters the kingdom of God. We all enter, one way or the other, as children.

Saul's experience, his conversion, isn't done yet. And interestingly it involves a reluctant "about face" on the part of someone else. All the way across town, the Lord is at again. Booming, this time, at poor Ananias. "Ananias" He shouts. Now Ananias is one of the disciples in Damascus. One of those whom Saul's was on his way to seize. Ananias responds "Here I am, Lord" probably thinking better of it once those words were out there. After all, there is no telling what can happen. "Now, Ananias" the Lord says, "Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's praying there. He has just had a dream (I wonder where that came from). And in this dream he saw a man named Ananias, that's you, enter his house and lay hands on him so he can see again.

Ananias is not happy about this. "Woe, Lord, You can't be serious. Everyone's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem. And now he has shown up with an order from the High Priest which give him permission to do the same here." Ananias does not want to go. Saul is an enemy and Saul can do him harm. It seems that Ananias doubts that people can change, that people can do an "about-face" in their lives. In many ways, he resembles Saul's companions on the road to Damascus. He doesn't quite see. How many of us don't quite see, don't want to admit that conversion is possible. Jesus is not in the mood to listen to Ananias' whining or our own on this score. "Don't argue! Go!" Now, here comes the bombshell of it all. "I've picked him. I've picked Saul" Jesus says "as my personal representative to kings, Gentiles and Jews. And I'm going to show him what he's in for- the hard suffering that goes with this new job." In other words, the Lord is saying to Ananias "Don't worry he'll know what kind of cost being my follower entails."

So Ananias does as he's told. Arriving at the house he finds Saul both blind as a bat and praying his heart out. Still not entirely sure about the course of recent event, Ananias sits down and perhaps has his own conversion right there. He calls Saul, who he once saw as an enemy, "brother". He tells Saul that Jesus has sent him, the same Jesus whom he encountered on the way to Damascus, on the way to this place, on the way to this moment. You know, Jesus shows up along our roads, along the ways we walk as well. For many of us, our Damascus road experiences were not nearly as dramatic as Saul's. They may not even have included a "this is when I got saved" moment. For those who can pinpoint the moment when the Lord knocked them off their horse and laid them flat, know that there is an incredible gift in having that experience.

But for others, whose conversion was more gradual, whose Damascus road was one long highway with Christ always at your side pushing you along, know that your conversion is just as valid. You just didn't need to tumble from the saddle. Which of course says something about God meeting us where we are. Some of us need that push, others don't. Though like Ananias, we all need to continue to experience conversion in our living, in our attitudes to others, even to those we don't have any reason to like, or even not to like. If we truly are converted, then we will see a whole lot more brothers and sisters out there, wandering about this world, than we do enemies. We will see more opportunities for ministry than challenges to our safety and security. These are the marks of a successful conversion, fruits of a life in Christ.

Yes, my friends, a conversion can be a dramatic affair. They can also be rather mundane. They can be incredibly successful or less than ideal. A lot of that depends on your willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to convict and convince you. Paul was convinced. Ananias too. For others it may take a while, Saul's companions on the road who couldn't quite see for instance. And for still others, the Holy Spirit may "almost" convince them as in the case of King Agrippa. Though that "almost" may seem like a defeat, it is in fact a hint of possibility. For those who are almost convinced will continue to give Christ at least a side long glance. In the end our prayer will have to be that those same sometimes slow underground processes which have been at work in us will work in them. And bring us all to the same place in the end.