

We had a serendipity experience in Christchurch. On the way there we were hit on the windscreen by a large stone. The glass held for which I'm grateful – it was on Trudy's side. Once we got to Christchurch I arranged to get it replaced. We were to go at 11:00am and A was going to pick me up at 11:30 to play golf. We asked the man at Smith and Smith whether there was a café handy to fill in the 40 minutes or so. He pointed over the road, so we carried my clubs to the cafe. I walked in and looked at the person nearest the door who was writing on a pad. I thought that looks very like P; she and J were part of the community here 20 years ago. So I asked – as you do or as I do. Well it was; we had a wonderful reunion. She was sitting in the café writing the script for a Christian musical. The golf paled into insignificance after that – in more ways than one! Anyway we think P might come and stay in a few days. It felt very like Acts I have to say.

If you've been reading the New Testament in 6 months then you'll be in Acts at the moment. What an incredible time? What encounters, what Holy Spirit power, what division, what disagreements, what danger, what joy, what effectiveness! Those were, these are, indeed the days of the Spirit! Earlier in the week we were reading about the conference in Jerusalem when Jew and Gentile had to do a deal - to decide what, if any, of the Old Testament laws Gentile Christians had to keep – it sounded a lot like the conversations involved in forming a coalition government and indeed they announced their agreement with the church wherever it met..

So to Jesus' encounter with Paul:

Acts 9:1-8a: 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?' Saul asked.

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'

The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing.

So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, 'Ananias!'

'Yes, Lord,' he answered.

The Lord told him, 'Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.'

'Lord,' Ananias answered, 'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.'

But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

I'll never tire reading when Jesus met Paul - it actually appears three times in Acts – the one we've just read, once before the Roman army commander in Jerusalem and once before the Judean King Agrippa and his wife Bernice.

The fresh awareness I had this week was that Paul wasn't looking for Jesus; quite the opposite – the only thing Paul was searching for was Christians to persecute and do damage to.

This isn't the biblical account of a man who is miserable and tormented until he finds the gracious God. This is the story of someone who quite without warning, is encountered by the living Jesus.

Let's face it, Paul, until Jesus met him ravaged the church, cast people in jail and even worse. On the road to Damascus Jesus enlists him as the great missionary to the Gentiles. The persecutor became the preacher.

In a similar way that's what happened to CS Lewis. He wasn't really searching for anything in life, when in his words, **'God closed in on me.'** And he exclaimed to God with surprise, **'so it was you all along.'** I guess there are those here who'd tell a similar story.

Just for a brief time I'd like to talk about Lewis as a 20th century illustration of Paul's conversion. Lewis' early experience of Christianity in his grandfather's church wasn't great – he comments **'we were offered the dry husks of Christianity.'** His early experiences were all negative. Even after reading GK Chesterton he concluded that **'Christianity was very sensible – apart from it being Christianity.'**

How did this happen? This what he wrote?

'You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I didn't then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet.

But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?

And think of what Paul became; think of what Lewis has meant to generations of strugglers who've found his theology and his children's stories inspirational and beyond inspirational.

Saul, Paul to us, in so many ways had a wonderful life as a 'Pharisee of the Pharisees' – he says as much in Philippians 3. He was a very devout Jewish believer – he'd done it all, and he was so right in what he believed; so right that he was driven to punish and destroy the Christian enterprise. I can't speak too strongly about how disinterested he was in even considering Jesus might have anything to say to him. In that way he represents so may we live among

But Jesus met him - look what happened. We've been reading the consequences of that meeting this week in our journey through Acts.

I've learnt:

- God is sovereign; God will act to fulfil his purposes
- God acts before us
- God invites us – I decided to become a Christian is actually in adequate theology; I responded to the Lord God may be more accurate
- God calls us– oh that we might say yes.

In this account of Saul's conversion, in his encounter with the living, risen Jesus, there's no development, no history, no precedent. The Lord shows up and in showing up transforms Saul into Paul, into the one he could never be on his own.

That's cool, I'm sure you believe all that. But what if you're a Christian, what if you've said yes to Jesus and you feel this morning I've done all that; this has nothing to say to me.

Are you willing to be challenged by the Lord God now, even if you say you follow Jesus? What happens for instance if you say you're a Christian but you're not really following – it's just an arrangement of convenience; it's mostly about you, your wants, and your likes.

What happens if you are a Pharisee of the Pharisees, so right about what you believe, so sure you're right and not really open to what God the Lord may want to address! In a sense this was Ananias' problem:

'Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.'

But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go!

So who are you today – in the later accounts of Paul's conversion some words are added. **'What shall I do, Lord?'**

Either that or **'Lord I have heard many reports.....'**

Prayer

Lord open our eyes as you did for Paul, help us to see – see ourselves as we really are and not what we would like others to think we are; let us be so transformed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us that our days will never be the same again. Amen

So what is God saying to you? Then we sing Amazing Grace