

Reflection for the 3rd Sunday of Easter by Rev. Steve Painting

Acts 9:1-20 & John 21:1-19

The events described in this week's Bible passages were hugely influential in the spread of Christianity across the world. They centre around three men and their encounters with Jesus. Simon Peter, Saul of Tarsus and Ananias. In many ways these three men were like us, ordinary people from different backgrounds. Their encounters with Jesus were life changing and although we might imagine that our lives are more mundane than theirs, our encounters with Jesus are life-changing also.

When I read Bible stories such as these, I often wonder what is going on in the hearts and minds of those involved. We only get the facts from the Bible and must read between the lines to grasp what these very real people might be feeling. During my time as part of the Lee Abbey community, I wrote an imaginary dialogue between Peter and Thomas, based around the story we read today from John's gospel. Thomas, we might remember had been challenged by Jesus over his doubts about the resurrection, but it is noteworthy that he appears again with the other disciples in this story on the beach. I set the dialogue prior to Peter's decision to go fishing and his subsequent conversation with Jesus. In it, I imagine that Thomas, now clear about Jesus' resurrection and identity, is still struggling with what the future might hold for him and the other disciples. I ascribe to Simon Peter, words that express personal self-doubt and a sense of unworthiness to be Jesus' disciple. 'Even if there is a future for Jesus' disciples, I'm not likely to be a part of it' I can hear him saying. I'm convinced that before Jesus appears on the beach, Peter is wrestling with his three time denial of Jesus at the palace of the high priest. Running events surrounding those denials over and over in his mind, I surmised that he might well have decided that he was no longer fit to be Peter the rock of the church and reverted to his identity as Simon the

fisherman. 'I'm going fishing', he says and the other disciples respond, 'we'll go with you.' It seems that even though he doubted himself, others were still inclined to follow his lead.

And so the fishing trip begins. Simon returns to what he thinks he knows. They go out all night but catch nothing. I can only imagine Simon's frustration and self-doubt as they head back to shore the following morning. Not only had he failed at being a disciple of the Messiah, but now it seems he has lost his touch as a fisherman too. Then comes a voice from the beach. 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.' As they haul in the catch, Simon, is taken back in time to a previous miraculous catch of fish. On that occasion he said to Jesus 'Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man' and I guess perhaps he is thinking the same on this occasion also. But Jesus will not go away. Simon has a calling to fulfil, and the matter of the denial needs to be dealt with. Three times Jesus asks 'do you love me' on the first occasion adding the words, 'more than these.' It is a humbling moment for Simon Peter. He was always so keen to prove himself, but at the High Priest's residence, he had bitten off more than he could chew. Now, here on the beach he must admit that his capacity to love sacrificially, is limited by his human frailties. He is not commissioned to 'feed Jesus' sheep' because he is superior in discipleship to anyone else, but simply because that is what Jesus is asking him to do. He must again take up his identity as Peter the rock, but no longer in his own strength.

Which takes me to the second of our two central characters. Saul, the zealous Jewish Pharisee, must also take up his God given identity and calling to become Paul, the evangelist to the gentiles. We first hear about Saul in Acts 7:58-8:1a. Luke mentions him giving approval to the stoning of Stephen. We then hear that he began to destroy the church by dragging believers from their houses and putting them in prison (Acts 8:3), The next we hear of him is in today's reading from Acts, where we are told 'he was still breathing out murderous threats

against the Lord's disciples.' Saul's conversion then, was about as dramatic as it gets, both in the events that took place and in the uncompromising reversal of his attitude towards the followers of Jesus and Jesus, himself. Yet I often wonder whether Saul's change of heart was as dramatic as it seems. Many commentators have suggested that Saul may have been deeply affected by the manner in which Stephen died. Was Saul, even as he set out to Damascus using his murderous threats simply to try to convince himself that he was doing the right thing? I can imagine him, as he travelled, praying to God for reassurance about the rightness of his mission, and if he did, the encounter that he had on the road, might well have been the answer to his prayer.

Meanwhile, in Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. This statement alone, tells us that the new faith had quickly spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea. Part of the reason for this was that the persecution of the church had got so bad in Jerusalem and Judea that many of Jesus' disciples were scattered and shared the faith in the places where they ended up (Acts 8:1b). We don't know whether Ananias himself had fled or whether he had come to faith through the witness of those that had, but he knew about Saul's reputation and had every reason to fear him. Perhaps he was even anticipating that Saul might journey to Damascus to search for him and others who shared his beliefs? I wonder then, what had been on Ananias' mind before his vision and the Lord's call to him. Was he in hiding, and did he know of the man called Judas who lived in Straight Street? I guess that this Judas was sympathetic to Saul and his mission, as Saul's companions would have most likely led Saul to the place in the city where it would have been arranged for him to stay. For Ananias then, the vision from God and the call that came with it were challenging to say the least, and I'm sure that there would have been some uncertainty in his mind about whether it was from God at all? I think it is natural for any of us, when we sense we are given direction

from God to try to weigh it all up. In many ways it is right to do that, but we can rationalise too much, especially when God's call carries a degree of personal risk. It is at these times when we fail to respond to God's leading. Ananias however, did respond and as the scales fell away from Saul's eyes we can only guess how he felt. Maybe his overriding emotion was one of relief that his instincts had been proved right and that he was going to get out safely. Maybe he also felt a degree of exhilaration at the things that had just taken place. Whatever his feelings, this was an experience that would undoubtedly have strengthened his faith and trust in Jesus, the circumstances of the event reinforcing what he already believed to be true.

As we think of these three men and put ourselves in their shoes, we can learn much about our own relationship with Jesus. The role of Ananias in Saul's conversion shows us that faith carries risk. It almost always takes courage, faith and trust to respond to the call of Jesus. Simon Peter and Paul knew this also. As God reminds Ananias, Paul had to be shown how much he must suffer for the sake of Jesus' name. We must also recognise that these stories demonstrate the necessity of humility in the life of the disciple. Like Simon Peter, all of us will have experienced failure and regret, yet that must not stop us from allowing Jesus to give us another chance to serve him. We can get things spectacularly wrong like Paul, but if our hearts are really for the work of God, Jesus can and will move us in the right direction. The thing that fascinates me about these stories is that the aspects of character that led both Peter and Paul to make wrong decisions in the past are essential to the calling that Jesus now places on their lives. Peter's willingness to lead from the front and Paul's zeal for God are redirected by Jesus to work for the good of God's kingdom. Jesus will use our characters, gifts and abilities also, if we have the courage to respond to his call and the humility to accept that we cannot do it in our own strength.