

Last Sunday we started a series on the journeys and teachings of an enigmatic, largely misunderstood and hugely misquoted evangelist by the name of Paul. He was born with the proverbial silver spoon, a prominent, practising Jew by virtue of **whom** he was born to, and a Roman citizen by virtue of **where** he was born. His well-to-do Jewish parents, **named** him Saul on the eighth day after birth, and used this name until well after his conversion, when it became in his interest and for his safety and security, to use his Roman name, Paul, to facilitate travel across the Roman empire.

There is an interesting distinction which emerges in Luke's writings, and I don't know whether Luke was intentional in making this distinction.

The life of the church as it emerged after Pentecost, was a life defined by the practices of **community**. To state the obvious, Christian fellowship did not exist before Pentecost. The result of the work of the Holy Spirit was a common life¹ among those who accepted the good news of Jesus the Christ, and this came about quite naturally. People shared their personal belongings and possessions among members of the community² as was needed, and the community supported the Apostles by looking after the sick and the hurting arriving with members of their family, needing care and feeding until they were prayed over until their healing was complete; the community then looked after the healed, as they stumbled into *new life* without ailments, sickness and disease, they had a new identity.

As Paul travelled among the churches sharing the Gospel of Christ, found himself being drawn into issues of practice: *How shall we do this or that?, What should we do / should we not do?* The free-spirit and spontaneity of

¹ Acts 2:42-47

² Acts 4:32-35

community meeting each other's needs as they arose, was fast disappearing, replaced by instruction and form, which became ritual, which in turn contributed to framework of the institution of Church. Add to this, the efficiency of Rome's well structured legal system and efficient administration, and it becomes clear how easily this legalistic, formal thinking found its way into the life of the church.

After his conversion on the road to Damascus and the restoration of his sight, Luke tells us, Paul spent a few days with the disciples at Damascus, *and immediately he proclaimed "Jesus is the Son of God" in the synagogue*³. If you had a death wish, this is what you would do! This declaration shocked the congregation, because the Jews knew Paul came with orders to capture Christians and take them as captives to Jerusalem for trial and to death.

Such was the power of Paul's conversion, Luke writes, *Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus, by proving that Jesus was the Christ*⁴.

There are two signs of a genuine experience of Christian conversion: **first**, the recognition that *conversion IS* exclusively the work of Christ in us, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit; no human effort ever brings about the change in a person's heart and mind, to decide to live by the laws of the Kingdom of God. **Second**, the evidence of genuine conversion is the person's willingness to declare, Jesus **IS** the Christ, i.e. **I believe** *Jesus is the Christ, who is the Son of God, who came from Heaven to conquer death, by which He saves us for eternal life with the Father*. Luke leaves no doubt, that Paul's conversion was not genuine.

³ Acts 9:19b-20

⁴ Acts 9:22

Paul's declarations in Damascus disturbed the peace so much, the religious authorities were prepared to break one of their sacred laws, *You shall not kill*, than have a defector, a traitor, a turncoat destroy the framework of their religious practice and social life.

The history of the Christian church is often the same. I am not aware of anyone today, who would kill another in order to preserve their church, but did Jesus not teach us, speaking in anger, calling names, being unkind, speaking insults, demeaning and degrading another person, is the same as killing them?⁵ Sadly, the history of the Christian Church shows it is prepared to be rid of someone, to sacrifice the one who challenges the present order, to preserve what it has comfortably grown accustomed to.

So, Paul was helped to escape Damascus by night, in a basket, let down from a third storey window, to disappear into "Arabia" (modern Saudi Arabia, southern Syria and Jordan), where he unlearned his Jewish religious world-view, and learned the values of the Kingdom of God.

After three years in Arabia, growing in his knowledge of God and relationship with Christ, Paul returns to Damascus and proceeds to Jerusalem, where he found the apostles (three years later), still suspicious of the genuineness of his conversion. Paul's zeal and enthusiasm demonstrates Newton's law, long before Newton discovered it: *every action has an equal and opposite reaction*. Paul's passion, enthusiasm and energy with which he pursued and persecuted Christians, now has an equal and opposite reaction: he uses the same passion, energy and enthusiasm to declare "Jesus is Lord", which of course, provoked and angered Jewish religious leaders. The apostles in Jerusalem found Paul's energy and zeal, too much to handle, so they took him to Caesarea and put him on a boat

⁵ Matthew 5:21-22

back to Tarsus, his home town. Paul spends the next several years in Antioch in the north western corner of Syria, helping establish communities of people who had embraced Jesus as the Christ. The church in Antioch is known as the Church where followers of Christ were first called **Christians**.

The church at Antioch demonstrates a wholesome spirit of *community* at work. History tells us, a famine *all over the known world* took place during the time Paul was in Antioch, and the *disciples determined, each according to their ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so by sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul⁶, and when they had completed their service, they returned to Antioch, bringing with them, young Mark.⁷*

We often view Paul as a johnny-come-lately, who steals the limelight from the other Apostles and imposes what often seems to us, as “dodgy”, potentially dangerous teaching that does not fit in with our modern times.

The life of Paul up to this stage, teaches us several lessons; let's look at two important ones this morning:

1. When we surrender our past to God through confession and repentance, if He does not hold it against us, why should anyone else? We are tempted to look at a person's past, see how “bad” they were, and say to ourselves (and whisper to others!), *Do you know what he/she did 10 years ago? How could any decent human being do something like that! And they have the temerity, the audacity to tell us, how great life is*

⁶ Acts:11:29-30

⁷ Acts 12:25

*for them?! If God has put someone's awful past behind Him by accepting their confession and repentance, **is** it appropriate for us to stand above God and discredit the person, by raking up their past?*

I am not a golfer and have turned down several offers to learn to play. This is the result of an argument between my mind and conscience: my mind says, *what joy can you get from hitting a small ball with all your might, across hectares of beautifully manicured lawn, then find it, and nudge or prod or bump it into a small hole, then repeat it 18 times, and my conscience argues back, Are you sure you have a whole day to do this? Don't you have something better, more useful to do?*

While the game of golf may not appeal to me, I think the idea of a golfer's handicap is a great idea: that more skilful players, give less skilled players of the game, the benefit of a **handicap**, *a method to enable all players of unequal ability, to compete with each other.*

When Paul arrives in Jerusalem with the zeal and energy of cat on a hot tin roof, to be met by the distress, anxiety, alarm of the Christian community, it was the apostle Barnabas who interceded for Paul, convincing them of Paul's sincerity of intention, and they granted Paul equal privileges. Luke tells us, *Paul went in and out among them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the Name of the Lord.*⁸ If you stand forgiven by God, you should be welcomed into the fellowship of Christians as a person of equal standing.

2. Both Paul and Peter were committed to proclaim the gospel of Jesus the Christ. However, their work tells us it was very necessary to find the right balance between setting up and following formal, prescribed

⁸ Acts 9:28

rituals, and informal, *ad hoc* practices of community, where a need is met because a person has an immediate need.

I am always impressed by the disciples' response in Antioch: hearing of the famine and the difficulties of the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, *each gave and sent relief, **as they were able**, according to their ability to give.*⁹ Imagine the power of our community, our fellowship of Christian believers, that we not only survive, but we thrive when we give spontaneously, *each according our ability to give.*

The community of Christian believers is a precious fellowship in God's sight. It is after all a part of the body of His Son Jesus; God loves us as individuals because, we have chosen to live, by not conforming to the pressures of the world's economic systems and social standards; instead we are people who believe in the work of Jesus. We are people who trust Jesus was victorious over death and is now the Christ. The community of Christian believers is **SO** precious a fellowship in God's sight, that He chose to send the Holy Spirit to protect, to encourage, to guide, to motivate, and to prompt us, into the work of God in this world.

This is our challenge: to live the life of community as God intended, not bound by rules or governed by ritual, but to be free to worship, to give, to share and to delight in the human race created by God!

AMEN.

⁹ Acts 11:29-30