

Hello everyone

Paul is a big deal in the New Testament, isn't he?

He writes a fair chunk of it

And he gets himself into some interesting situations..

He's lowered down walls in a basket, he's arrested and run out of town more than once

He acts like an agony aunt providing advice not just to individuals but to whole communities

All this is described in some detail by Luke in the book of Acts and by Paul; himself in the letters that he wrote.

Yet the reason that prompts him to do all this is tucked away at a hinge point in the book of acts and a mention or two in his letters.

Paul has this amazing experience that underpins what he does.

He sees Jesus in what some call the fifth version of the Easter story. The tomb less version, they say.

It has a huge impact on him, but all we hear of is a light and a voice. Paul falls on the ground and he is taken away.

It's an exciting plot outline, but lacks a lot of detail.

Yet it is a few lines that have affected many lives over the centuries.

Including ours.

Wherever in the world Christians are, this story has impacted on their lives. It's the story that opened up the spread of the good news to the ends of the Earth.

The men who were accompanying Paul on that journey heard what Paul heard

I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

Unlike Paul, though, they didn't see anything.

Paul, a passionate life long servant of the Torah, has his life loosened, turned upside down by a voice.

He no longer sees all about God.

Who is this Jesus that he is at war with?

And just who actually is God?

Why does God want him to follow him in a different way?

Saul has to start thinking it all out from the grass roots again.

It will involve accepting Jesus

That rebel he persecuted, as the king of Israel.

Does that make us pause and think a bit too?

When have we had to rethink Jesus and church and God in our lives?

Especially now with all that's happening in the world. Rethinking things from the ground level up.

How do we do that?

How easy is it to change our views dramatically on anything?

Who are you Saul asks,

It's a question that we ask too.

I am Jesus whom you persecuted is the reply.

Whoever Jesus is, he has already got a particular maybe even painful picture of Saul.

Now he is asking Saul to revise his plans of who God and Jesus are.

Saul is taken to Damascus to a house in a street called straight.

For three days Paul as Saul is now called fasts and prays to God for true insight.

That third day! It's a bit of a favourite day for decisions in the bible, isn't it?

On the third day, someone came to visit Paul.

In the same way as we have Facetime and Zoom for instant video messaging,

Back in the bible they have visions

Ananias is the one who had seen God in a vision tell him to go to the house where he will find Saul a man from Tarsus.

He is seeing you right now Ananias, he's seeing a vision of you laying hands on him to help him see again.

To see again.

To help him see again.

It means much more than sight doesn't it.

It means help Saul understand who Jesus is and how he relates to God.

Ananias is confused.

Come on Lord there are limits he thinks.

I have heard how much upset this man caused your followers in Jerusalem. He watched as Stephen was stoned.

Look, Ananias, God says, I want you to go to him because I've chosen him to be the one to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and Kings and the children of Israel.

So, Ananias went to Straight street and as he entered the house, he called Saul Brother and he tells Saul that he is here to restore his sight and fill him with the Holy Spirit. This is what Saul had needed.

His confession, worry and disbelief is re ordered into faith and he is baptised.

Maybe that seems a straight forward story, but Luke is weaving a story about call for us which include links back to the relationship between David and King Saul. It's strange, there's very little details about Saul's conversion to Paul, yet Luke tells us a lot about Ananias and those around Paul who had to come to terms with this big shock for the early church. Their main persecutor now a fervent follower of Jesus. Ananias demonstrates that call involves following what God wants not what we think we can offer or do. It involves accepting people. As he calls Saul brother he overlooks the upset he caused. Soon though, Saul starts to fear for his life and for the first of many times in Acts, Jesus followers smuggle him out of the city over the city wall in a basket.

He then tries to join the disciples in Jerusalem, but Luke tells us clearly the extent of the difficulty Paul found in being accepted by the church, at least at first. Even though the disciples had heard directly from Jesus himself that they must welcome and help everyone- even the Samaritans, they were still afraid of Saul or Paul.

More evidence if we need it that the disciples were only human just like us.

Barnabas then describes Paul's adventure on the road to Damascus and how after this encounter, he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

And the disciples do send him off to preach in his home city of Tarsus.

Then Luke reminds us, as he often does, that the churches were growing. But this is one of the first instances where the word church doesn't mean a local community, it points to believers spread across a wider geographical area.

The church through Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace, Luke writes.

The early days of Paul's Christian teaching is a very human story of how churches work.

The good news is still spread by the church today just as it was back in the first century Someone feels the pull of God on their life and others gather to help them work out just what that means to them.

At some time, we've all needed that help and at other times, we've all been the ones helping out.

I wonder who you are helping out at the moment shape their response to the good news.

Then again who do you look to for advice about answering your own questions.

Peace be with you

Amen.