

Sunday 5th May 2019 – People of the Resurrection 1: Paul (Acts 9:1-20, John 21:14-19)

Today we're starting a series called 'People of the Resurrection' – the idea is that in this Easter Season we see how the resurrection power of Jesus changed peoples' lives – and still does today. For once we're using the standard lectionary readings for these weeks, which are from the book of Acts – and there's some well known stories and a couple of less well-known ones.

But today we start with one of the most famous of them all, and that's the conversion of St Paul – or Saul as he was known at the time. It's a story which has found its way into popular culture – even today we still talk of a 'road to Damascus' experience to denote a sudden or startling event which causes a big change in our lives. Well, this is the original road to Damascus event, which dates to probably just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, when the church was very young, but the first real persecution was already beginning.

But before we look at the story, I want to spend a few minutes looking at the figure of St Paul himself. He's such a huge figure in the life of the church, but it's become popular especially in recent years to give him a bit of a kicking. I think that's partly due to the naturally rebellious instinct in all of us which likes to moan about our leaders – and the bigger the leader often the more disrespectful we are. But there are specific criticisms made of him which I think are unfair but also affect the very way we see faith, since so much of the New Testament was written by him or by his close friend Luke. So since Paul isn't around to defend himself, I'm going to spend a few minutes speaking on his behalf, which might even help to shed a bit more light on the story of his conversion.

If you read the stuff about Paul, or listen to his critics, you'll hear basically 4 accusations made about him:

The first is that he didn't like women very much. I remember one of my friends who was a mature Christian simply dismissing him as a 'crusty old misogynist'. (Sure you've heard things like that...) Obviously the role of women in church leadership has been a subject of huge debate and now is not the time to get into that. But when people make these kind of putdowns of Paul, it completely ignores the evidence we have from Paul's own writing that he actually related very easily to women and counted many of them as close friends. For example, if you go to the end of the book of Romans and all his personal greetings, of the 24 people he names, we know for sure that 9 are women. He begins by greeting Phoebe, then his great friends Priscilla and Aquila – in fact he calls her Prisca, it's like we would say Pris – i.e. the shortened affectionate version of someone you're close to. He also talks about his 'dear friend Persis', and Rufus' mother who he says has been 'like a mother to me'.

People like to paint this picture of Paul as a cold, lonely man, but the text of the bible suggests that nothing could be further from the truth – he seems to have a knack of making friends wherever he goes (and not just enemies) and relates remarkably easily to people of both sexes. Just like Jesus in Samaria, when Paul arrives in Philippi he breaks all social conventions by speaking to Lydia, and then becoming a guest in her house – and she becomes the first Christian convert in Europe. And years later he greets lots of these old friends in very intimate terms.

The second accusation is that his writing is too dense and academic. And we have to admit that it is deep and needs careful study! But again there are 3 things to note here: the first is very practical. Paper was expensive and rare – Paul (often in prison) usually only had a single sheet to write everything he needed to say to a particular church – so of course he couldn't waste words. When he's compared unfavourably to Jesus as a communicator we must remember that Jesus

taught verbally, he didn't write anything down, that was done by others later – it's a completely different method, which leads to a completely different way of communicating truth.

Then we also have to remember that Paul was tasked with taking the message into Greek and Roman culture, the two most educated civilisations on the planet at the time, who both placed a heavy emphasis on logical thought and reasoning. Paul has no credibility if he can't operate in that culture, and we often forget that he was one of the greatest contextualisers of the gospel of all time, taking the universal truths of the faith into cultures they'd never penetrated before, with spectacular success.

Finally, as soon as the Christian faith started to spread, it was contested. Christians were challenged on the fundamentals of what they believed – and their life often depended on it. So the first generation of Christians had to work out *why* the identity of Jesus was so important, *why* Jesus placed so much emphasis on his death and resurrection, and how to marry the Jewish roots of the faith with Jesus' clear teaching that the gospel was now for everyone. If Christ is the cornerstone, it fell mostly to Paul to lay the hard concrete foundations on which to build the edifice of God's people for the rest of history. That needs serious brainpower, so we should be glad that Paul did much of the heavy lifting to make that possible.

The third accusation levelled at Paul is that he created a different faith to that of Jesus, that somehow he invented a Christianity that didn't look much like the one Jesus intended. There was a documentary on the BBC last year which made this exact point, so this isn't just an academic debate, it's seeped into popular culture and thinking about Paul. But again, I want to challenge that this morning: it's simply not true, and where Paul does expand on the core message of Jesus, he does so because he's having to work out what following Jesus looks like in the face of two huge challenges.

The first is that Jesus had an itinerant ministry, we don't know what happens to most people after their life-changing encounters with Jesus. But for the faith to spread and the church to grow, the early Christians have to work out what it means to be a kingdom community which lives in the same place with the same people for an extended period of time. The apostles might move on from place to place, like Jesus – but what about everyone left behind? How do we love our neighbour, practise repentance, spread the word, pray regularly, and so on? *And* do that with the same small group of people, some of whom we don't like, year after year after year?

And secondly, *if* we do go and live out Jesus' kingdom message of good news to the poor, how do we form a community which then has rich and poor worshipping together? *If* we do share Jesus kingdom message to all people of every culture, what happens to Christian communities which comprise both former Jews and former pagans, some of whom refuse to eat pork and blood and others who eat meat sacrificed to idols?

If the Christian faith is going to survive, people like Paul have to translate the kingdom principles of Jesus into real communities living together for decades – and work out how to respond to some of the long-term consequences of Jesus' kingdom message. And *that* is why Paul appears to answer lots of questions not found in the gospels. If you look at the heart of Paul's teaching, he agrees with Jesus on all of the fundamentals – the reality of the inbreaking kingdom manifested by God's Son Jesus, the need for repentance, the primacy of love as the way to live, the reach of this kingdom to all people of every race and background, the power of the Spirit to blow where it pleases, the ministry of healing and wholeness as the heart of discipleship, the necessity of prayer, the depth of God's grace to us, and so on and so on. It all tallies...

If Jesus is the owner and founder of the company, Paul is the operations manager and logistics guy (all rolled into one) taking that vision and making it real in every shop on every high street. He might seem to spend time worrying about some of the nuts and bolts that the owner doesn't mention, but he realises that the nuts and bolts are the way of making that vision real to the people on the ground, so that the what the company offers can reach every community around the world.

The truth is that it wasn't Paul which changed the culture of the faith, it was the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the 4th century which created a fundamentally different type of church and expression of faith. Faith in 300AD was pretty similar to what it was in the New Testament, and Paul laid the groundwork for that which allowed it to spread across the whole empire.

The final accusation is one which we can probably understand a little more, and that is **the more general sense that Paul is an intimidating character**. He is so 100% sold out on his faith and his mission that it must have been hard to keep up. I would admit that I probably wouldn't have wanted Paul for a boss! But that is the way with great people isn't it? There's usually something about them that most of us mortals find a bit scary – but we can still admire them and be inspired by their single-minded devotion.

And Acts 9 shows us most clearly where Paul's single-minded devotion came from. I've used up most of my time, but let's just spend a few moments back in this great story. **Why is Paul so utterly in love with Jesus? Because he met him!** At the road to Damascus, God doesn't try to argue with Saul, or even scare him into submission – he just meets him. Ardent *religion*, with all its rules, rituals and prejudices, is blown away by *relationship*. Jesus loves Saul, even as he is, and confounds all his opinions with an encounter of love. 'Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?' Not these people, or even my church – but me. And the scales of pride and self-righteousness fell from his eyes...

What fired Saul, or Paul as he became, through all of his journeys and sufferings was very simple: *he met Jesus*, who loved him and forgave him, and gave him hope, and joy and purpose for the future.

As I close, I did want to say what I said about Paul, and I hope for some of us that renews our confidence in what we believe and the firm foundations of our faith. But my message for all of us this morning is very simple: have you met Jesus? And if not, would you like to? We get so confused and distracted with what it means to be a Christian. But so often we miss the point: it's not about coming to church, or helping others, or being a good person. Yes, these are all good and necessary, but they're outcomes of something much deeper. It's about meeting Jesus, and finding in that encounter that God loves us, and forgives us, and wants to walk with us as a friend every day.

My friends, don't settle for religion. It won't save you and it certainly won't make you happy. Saul only worked that out in Damascus when he discovered the simplest and greatest secret of all. The key to life is meeting Jesus. Once we do that, everything else starts to fall into place.

So as I close, have you met Jesus? Is he more than just a figure to admire in history – is he your friend? A constant companion, a guide, an encourager. That is God's true purpose for your life – to know him as a friend. For some of us that is already a wonderful reality. For others, perhaps today is the day to claim it, that God might meet you and bless you just like he did Saul...