

Easter 5 (Acts 9.1-9)

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The story of Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus – Saul who was to become Paul – is one of the most famous episodes in the New Testament. Though perhaps not fully recognised at the time, it constitutes a turning point in the early Christian movement – the shape of which (it seems) might have been profoundly different without the energy and intellect and passion of this most dangerous convert.

By the time the Acts of the Apostles introduces us to Saul, a lot has already happened. The original disciples have received the energising power of the Holy Spirit and have begun their journey from being 'pusillanimous fisher folk into international heroes and martyrs'. Peter and John have been arrested and miraculously released, they have preached to crowds at the Temple and to the council of the priests and elders; conversions and healings happen apace, the gospel of resurrection is being formulated and the new community is beginning to organise, distributing welfare to the poor and sharing their own goods in common. And all the while tensions with the synagogue and religious establishment continue to rise. Official questioning, arrests, floggings and censoring – all these have been features of the new movement's relationship with the religious and civil authorities. In chapter 7 of Acts, the tension comes to a head and erupts.

A deacon named Stephen, 'filled with grace and power', has reinterpreted the story of Israel in the light of Jesus, and in such a way that it constitutes a profound threat to the identity and self-understanding of the religious council and the crowd. He has charged them with failing to recognise God's anointed and opposing the Holy

Spirit, of being a 'stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears' and so murderers of the Righteous One, radically disobedient to God (Acts 7.51-52). Enraged by what they hear, the crowd turns into a lynch mob, dragging him out of the city and beginning to stone him. And, we are told, those who cast the first stones (the official witnesses) 'laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul ... And Saul approved of their killing him' (7.58, 8.1). The death of Stephen, who is remembered as the first martyr of the new movement, precipitates 'a severe persecution' in which Saul is portrayed as having a central role, 'ravaging the church by entering house after house' and dragging off both men and women to prison.

Now, the book of Acts has an epic cast of characters and a striking number of story lines in play. Theologian James Alison has remarked that Luke writes a bit like a Hollywood script-writer. There's the drama of miraculous events, angelic visitations and visions of the open heaven. And there's Luke's handling of multiple sub-plots, cutting from one piece of action to another, traversing Judea and Asia Minor as he follows different characters scattered by persecution, taken up in the Spirit, finding the next mission field. After the death of Stephen, Luke next gives us the journey of Philip who went into Samaria, memorably encountering an Ethiopian eunuch on the road going down from Jerusalem. Then Luke leaves Philip and turns back to the doings of Saul: '*Meanwhile* Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus'. That is where we took up the story tonight.

I wonder, what is it in this story that stands out for you? For me, it was always the flashing light, the voice, the sheer unmistakable-ability of the fact that it is *God* who has suddenly intervened in Saul's journey to Damascus. And for me, for a time, that bit of the story worked more as a stumbling block than as a help to my faith. Because – God never did that for me. God never just appeared, out of nowhere, unmistakable, unmissable. I wanted to believe but it all seemed so unlikely – so I needed to be sure and I wanted proof, I wanted an 'experience', my own 'road to

Damascus' event. But in wanting that, I now think, I missed the real heart of this encounter, what it was about it that transformed Saul's whole way of understanding who God is and what loving God means, what it was about it that transformed *him* from being a self-righteous zealot to one who could rejoice in his own failure and weakness in compassionate solidarity with the outcast and persecuted (2 Cor. 12.10). So, in other words, as long as I focused on the drama and the Hollywood light, I missed what this episode had to teach about the defining condition for recognising, experiencing God.

What *is* the heart of this encounter? 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. No wonder it left Saul blind for three days – three days of Jonah in the belly of the whale, three days of Jesus in the tomb – three days (the biblical shorthand signifying the time that is necessary) for an utter dissolution of who he was, where he could see nothing because there were no categories by which he might make sense of anything anymore. Saul has been zealous for the Lord, striving by all that he knew to be faithful to the demands of the Law, and now he discovers that he has been utterly mistaken, that in persecuting the church he has been persecuting Jesus, and that Jesus is Lord after all.

Here, I think, is the heart of true Christian conversion and transformation, true encounter with God. It isn't the blinding light, the vision, the voice from heaven, the zapping which takes us beyond all doubt. It is instead the process of losing, letting go our own righteousness, any secure sense of our own goodness or insider-status. It is coming to experience our utter poverty and futility, our utter inability to come to God on our own terms or by our own efforts, giving up even the illusion that we think we know what that would look like, and then discovering that somehow, miraculously, never quite how we expect, it is precisely here that God in Jesus actually meets us. Precisely in our weakness and failure, does the God who has come to us in weakness call us by our true name.

Why is it like this? Why does conversion, transformation, meeting God – whatever you like to call it – why does this depend on our failing, our letting go of the selves we have so carefully cultivated? Why is this the inexorable logic of the Christian journey? I don't know – I don't know why it is like this. We can't explain it – all we can do is to seek a way to touch and express this difficult knowledge. When Saul relies on his observance and defence of the Law to generate his standing with God, then his goodness becomes his possession and something that generates a *claim* on God. His goodness actually *closes* him up and, in the process, God comes to look more and more like Saul – made in Saul's image, righteous, judgemental, violent, and separated from all that is designated 'not God'.

Jesus shows us a different way. He, remember, disclaimed all goodness of his own: 'Why do you call me good, only God is good?' And his standing with God was not based on his accumulation of personal merit, but in his absolute entrusting of himself to the Father, his handing over of himself in listening obedience, in utter poverty even to death. He receives his life from God and as gift – a gift he is always returning freely to the Father.

So Jesus reveals that the only way truly to belong to God, to enter the 'kingdom of heaven' as the NT expresses it, is to give up self-dependence, self-reliance – exactly as he did. We are loved not because we are good but because God is good, and our only security is in radical trust which feels (often enough) like radical risk. 'Follow me'. How do we become capable of this kind of trust and risk, giving up self-dependence and the assurance of our own righteousness? We are most likely to learn it, as Saul discovered, in the *failure* of our best attempts at getting it right for ourselves, when we are confronted with the impossibility or futility of all the ways we have tried to make a goodness, a life, an identity of our own, when all our categories have collapsed and we have no more energy to start again. And although we experience this defeat *ultimately* as joyous relief and gratitude, it can first involve a bitter experience of poverty and humiliation.

Think of what it must have been like for Saul, now completely dependent on those he'd formerly despised and held in contempt, revealed as having got God completely wrong. What a come down for a young Pharisee destined for great things in the religious establishment – headed for a bishopric at least! You can imagine his former colleagues tut-tutting over his fall from grace, and Paul having to suck it up and keep letting go of all the ways he'd formerly measured his performance, receiving his new life in listening, following the God who came to him as darkness, who so strangely identifies with the off-scourings of the earth, the poor and persecuted, the unclean and the failed. This is *always* hard. And yet, it is also a profound relief – in the end, I can't make myself OK and I don't have to. God meets me as I am unmade, in my failure and utter wrong-headedness – and then calls me on an adventure in the company of Jesus to reconcile all things. For Paul – it was an adventure that changed the course of human history. Might it be so for us as well?