

June 2, 2019    A Key Event    Acts 9:19b-31

Saul who became Paul is a key figure in the New Testament. His story is told in great detail in the book of Acts beginning with chapter 9 and the story of his Damascus Road conversion, the result of being confronted by the risen Christ. In fact there are many voices which make the claim that the Book of Acts slowly transforms the image of the infant church. It begins as the Acts of the Apostles. In fact it ends as a history of the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles. Some say a more accurate title would be The Acts of the Apostles and Then of Paul. The point is that the infant church which began in Jerusalem, consisting of converted Jews, multiplied in the Gentile cities of the Greco-Roman world to the point where the Church of Jesus Christ could accurately be described as Primarily a Gentile reality.

When I say that the conversion of Saul to Paul is a key event what I mean is this. You and I can draw a straight line from that event to our own experience of faith in Jesus. Over time and in a yet undiscovered part of the world we are the continuation of the mission to the Gentiles, which simply means, the mission to the non-Jewish world. Here we are in 2019. We are a group of nonconformist Protestants, Measuring our faith and its truths by the Biblical word. But here is something we seldom say out loud. We tend to interpret that Biblical word by means of the influence of Paul's preaching and the teaching in his letters. In the Christian family tree, we are

of the Pauline branch more than the Peter branch. In fact, that is so true that we sometimes seem to have forgotten that all of the apostles and the majority of the original church was made up of Jews including the one time Pharisee, who became Paul.

This morning's reading makes the point that very quickly after his conversion Paul was willing to represent Jesus publicly by preaching in the communities to which he had immediate access; namely the Jewish synagogues. His knowledge of the Old Testament served him well. His experience on the Damascus Road had convinced him that Jesus was not only risen from the dead but the Son of God. And in this little phrase "he baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ," you have a wealth of information. What that means is that Paul listed the prophecies from the Old Testament which the Jews claimed were about the Messiah, and showed how they were fulfilled in Jesus. He did his homework. He convinced many Jews to become followers of Jesus. And he created what would become the model of Biblical interpretation for the movement we call the Church.

Paul's conversion was a key event. When the Reformation occurred centuries later, Martin Luther would discover in the letters of Paul, the doctrine of saving grace. It is that doctrine which colours the balance of Protestant thinking concerning Jesus, Jesus teaching, and the attitude of God toward us. When we ordain elders or ministers we ask basic

questions. Behind those questions are basic assumptions. First that because of sin we are entirely lost but for the saving work of Jesus and HIM crucified and risen. We are saved from our sin by faith in Jesus, not by the good works we do or the lifestyle we embrace. And by the way, that does not mean we may live as we wish. We try to live by Biblical guidelines. The point is that this side of Jordan we never become perfect. We never achieve sin free living, and except for the grace of God in Jesus, we would be as lost as ever we were. The Hymn title Amazing Grace in some ways says it all. Believing in Jesus we are amazed at the degree to which God loves us. We are amazed that God has adopted us, chosen children of the Kingdom. We are amazed and to a degree surprised, that God would love us so. But here we are. And we are unable to picture ourselves opting for any of the world's alternatives.

We understand the ethic of loving our neighbour as so clear a mission that we find ourselves crossing lines we never thought we would cross. To render help. To share our blessings, including our money. We see a need to render aid, help, assistance next door at home, and all over the world, all at once. We find it unacceptable to hide behind a lack of resources when we hear of people in need. We are more likely to say we must do something to help. And we pray that God and not ourselves will receive the glory and praise for heroic effort.

That did not start with Paul. It started with Jesus. But Paul took that message in its world changing way, to the non-Jewish part of the world. The conversion of Saul who became Paul was a key event. And so it is that we say, Glory to God in the highest for HE alone is the Master of things.

Let us pray.

Lord in all we say and do we would glorify your Holy name. Grant your blessing on the Church including the Presbyterian Church In Canada. Grant that decisions made by The General Assembly may be honouring to Your name and in keeping with Your word. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen