

Theme: - The conversion of Saul.

In Acts chapter 7 we have the stoning of Stephen, and in verse 58 we read, “The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man Saul” and in chapter 8 verse 1 we have “And Saul approved of their killing him.” This is the first mention of St Paul, as he became to be known, in the Bible.

Our reading starts at chapter 9 verse 1 with these words, “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Saul is breathing threats and murder, because he believes them to be enemies of God. He is determined to root out false teaching and to imprison false teachers. Saul is passionate for God, but sadly he is misguided.

From verse 2 it is clear that a large number of disciples of the Lord have fled to Damascus for safety, and Saul is determined to find them and bring them back to Jerusalem for possible imprisonment or execution, but to do that he has to have some sort of authority. Now Damascus is in Syria, and the government of Syria would not help him so he goes to the high priest who gives him letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus who would help him to root out the disciples who had fled Jerusalem.

At this time the early followers of Christ, both men and women, were referred to ‘as those belonging to the Way.’ So named it is believed because Jesus spoke of being “the way, and the truth, and the life” John 14 verse 6. Now the distance from Jerusalem to Damascus, if one could go in a straight line, is about 140 miles, and it was on this journey, which could well take a week on foot, that God interrupted their journey. In verse 3 we are told that as Saul was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, I have a vision of lightning without the thunder enough to make him fall to the ground. Indeed, in Acts chapter 26 verse 13 St Paul describes the light, “As brighter than the sun.” And in the sunshine of the middle east, it must have been exceedingly bright.

It was while he was on the ground that Saul heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” In the Old Testament, God often uses a name twice to get the attention of a person whom he is calling for a special role. In Genesis chapter 22 verse 11 as an example we read, “But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham,’ and he said here I am.” Paul’s reply is, “Who are you Lord.” In this case Saul is using the word ‘Lord’ as a sign of respect, as we might call somebody sir. One thing is certain, Saul knows that there is only one God, so he would not ask God who he is.

The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Jesus identifies himself with his disciples so inferring that in persecuting his disciples is tantamount to persecuting Jesus. Jesus’ reply must have shaken Saul to his very core. Saul’s mission in life had been to stamp out the fledgling Christian movement lest it takes hold. Now Saul learns that, instead of doing Godly work as he intended, he had been opposing God. But God tells him to get up and enter the city, and there you will be told what you are to do. In the mean while those who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one; this last statement infers that Saul did see Jesus when he spoke to him.

Verse 8 reads, “Saul got up from the ground, and although his eyes were open, he could see nothing.” The glory of the Lord had blinded Saul, so they led him by the hand and brought

him into Damascus.” Saul “now discovers on a literal level what readers of the gospel already know to be true about him that he was not only blind on a spiritual level, but he is now physically blind as well. We are then told, “And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” We don’t know the meaning of Saul’s fasting. Perhaps he is fasting in repentance for having gone against God by persecuting Christ. Or perhaps he is simply in shock at his sudden blindness, and all that blindness would mean for him in the future.

“Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias.” This is the first mention of this Ananias and once he has completed his task regarding Saul he disappears again from the Bible. This is very encouraging because clearly God uses ordinary people sometimes in significant ways, and sometimes just once in a lifetime, as with Ananias, and sometimes in a way that is hardly noticeable, but for God no less important. The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision, and he replied, “Here I am”, this is also reminiscent of Abraham who also replied, “Here I am.” The Lord then gave him clear instructions, he said, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.” Tarsus is a city in modern day Turkey. The Lord continued by saying that Saul is now praying, and that Saul has seen a vision of a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he may regain his sight.

But here Ananias questions the Lord, because Ananias is fully aware of Saul’s reputation, and Ananias replied, “Lord I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.” And he could have added, ‘Do you really want me to introduce myself to such a man?’ I can fully understand why Ananias questioned the Lord about Saul, because of his reputation, and the risk he is taking when he declares to Saul that he is a follower of Jesus. And in case the Lord hadn’t been told, Ananias tells the Lord that Saul has authority from the chief priests to bind all who speak in your name. But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”

Verse 16 reads, “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Saul who intended to persecute those who follow Christ will now suffer for Christ’s sake. In 2 Corinthians 11 from verse 23 St Paul lists some of the things he has suffered for Christ’s sake; he lists imprisonments, countless floggings near to death, five times 40 lashes, three times beaten with rods, stoning, three times shipwrecked, and many other trials and tribulations. So, Ananias entered the house where Saul was staying, “He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’” Two reasons for laying hands on people today are, one to confirm a person’s baptism at confirmation performed by a bishop, and the other for healing which, in a Christian context, can be performed by anyone in a prayerful situation.

Ananias’ greeting of, “Brother Saul,” is remarkable given the opinion he so recently expressed about Saul, and is a clear sign of Ananias’ deep faith in Christ, in dismissing all that he had heard from other people and obeying Christ. In this case Ananias was laying his hands on Saul to regain Saul’s sight and to fill Saul with the Holy Spirit. In verse 18 we are told that, “Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.”

We are also told that after eating some food he regained his strength, but there is no mention of him receiving the Holy Spirit. However, we are then told that he got up and was baptised, at which time like most of us he received the Holy Spirit. Indeed, from that very moment his life demonstrated beyond all doubt that the power of God's Holy Spirit was with Saul who was also better known as St Paul.

Just a quick word here about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift from God who bestows the Holy Spirit on who he chooses. In Acts chapter 10 verse 44 God bestowed the Holy Spirit on both Jew and Gentile who were listening to St Peter talking, and as a result Peter ordered them to be baptised. In this case the Holy Spirit came to them before they were baptised.

Many people may ask, 'What quality did God see in Saul that led God to choose him to be an apostle. After all Ananias was obedient and for all he knew admitting to Saul that he was a follower of Jesus could have got him killed, so why not Ananias who demonstrated so much faith. St John in his book of revelation gave us the answer to that question, and it's recorded in Revelation chapter 3 starting at verse 15 where we read, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." That is why God selected St Paul to be an apostle because once St Paul got the bit between his teeth there was no stopping him. Before his conversion he was prepared to do anything to eradicate the Christian way, whereas once he realised that Christ was the Son of God, he not only dedicated the rest of his life to Christ, but was totally committed to give his life for Christ.

In our last verse we are told that that Saul immediately started to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues as the Son of God. The message for us today is always to be ready, because we do not know when Jesus will come to us as he came to Ananias.

Amen