

What are you waiting for? Acts 21.27-22.29. 11th April 2010.

Home Group

Worship: Psalm 4. So soon after Easter it would be quite in order to sing an Easter Hymn: Jesus Christ is risen today ...

Welcome & Word

1. Read Acts 21.27-22.29 – it's a long chunk so get everyone reading a verse each and keep going round till you get to the end!
2. Who has Saul been physically persecuting? Who has Saul been actually persecuting? (22.7)
3. Part of something bigger – How do we (St Mary's) connect to the wider Church? (there are lots of answers to this) How can you be part of that connection?
4. Why is giving to other Christians good?
5. Where in the world does this sort of violence still happen to Christians? (you might want to make a note of the answers and pick it up in prayer later)
6. How would you feel about having either Saul or Paul in your home group?
7. Why was it called The Way? (22.4)
8. Not everyone has a Damascus conversion but perhaps three or four of you in your group would like to tell their story of how come they're a Christian.
9. Has anyone spoken about God or Church to anyone recently? What happened?
10. What are you waiting for? Do you know what would help you next to grow in faith?

Works We're part of a growing community so make a deliberate purpose to learn 2 new names per week. And pray.

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It's after Easter so we change sermon series and we move on to Acts. We will be looking at Acts from now until Pentecost and then we'll change series again. We have come to a pivotal part of the Acts of the Apostles. St Paul has come to an end of his missionary journeys travelling by boat and foot and sometimes getting in trouble and very often leaving behind him a small and growing community of Christians.

These Christians are an interesting mix of good Jews, of God-fearers – ie gentiles who are familiar with the Jewish scriptures and have been part of a synagogue and now there have been some pagan gentiles if you like – people who have been converted to following Jesus and have not come to Jesus through Judaism, through seeking a Messiah (a Jewish concept) but have to love Him as their Lord and Saviour. So exciting times across the known world. Churches springing up and people from all backgrounds, rich and poor, slave and free, people who have been demon possessed and people who are quite boringly normal.

That doesn't mean that everything is easy – as we read in Paul's Letters we find that it's not at all easy for such a big range of people to come together as One Family but it is good news all the same.

And now Paul has come home to Jerusalem. He has come back and brought with him a large financial gift. And this is a really important way of those distant churches saying Look we're part of something bigger, we connect to the Jerusalem church, we recognise you lot as Christians and your acceptance of this gift is an important sign that you accept us, even though you've never met us, even though we're not all circumcised.

It's just tremendously important – I could at this point go off on a tangent about how important it is to be connected to your local church and then how important it is, through that church, to be connected to the world wide church. But I won't.

Paul arrives in Jerusalem, just in time for Passover, so the place is full of people from all over the world. So he goes up to the temple and at the advice of the local church he makes a bit of a show of being a good law abiding Jew by joining in with some others who are finishing a vow and going through the purification rites. It seems like good advice but it backfires and a riot starts up.

Paul is being beaten up when the Romans come along but there's too much noise to work out what the problem is so Paul is presumed to be guilty of something and chained up with double chains – quite painfully heavy – and dragged off.

The charge if it could have been heard was an accusation that Paul had brought a non-Jew beyond the Court of the Gentiles and into the Court of the Jews.

Archaeological fragments have been found around the temple area that say, and we know from other sources that there would have been a big multilingual sign up saying – sort of – Death to any non-Jew who comes past here! And the Romans were quite happy to comply with this rule.

It's quite possible that with all this shouting going on that Paul himself isn't quite sure what this is all about. Certainly when he speaks, he doesn't defend himself of this charge.

What Paul says next I have often found of great comfort when I've been really really struggling with doubt. On those very dark heavy days when you wonder where on earth God is and why you bother at all. And I've thought about Paul.

There's no getting away from the fact that Paul goes from being one sort of person to being a very different sort of person. And the reason is Jesus.

There's no getting away from Paul, as Saul, being brought up a good Jew, proud of his heritage.

He would have learned off by heart the Torah (first five books) and then he would have been admitted to the next class up and learned off by heart the Nevim – the Prophets – and then and I doubt there will have been very many of his friends still with him in this last class, he would have gone on to learn the Ketuvim, the writings, (Ecclesiastes and proverbs and so on). All the Old Testament off by heart.

But its more than that, he would have learned to think about them and question them and contrast different verses with other verses and bring in the teachings of other Rabbis. And then he will have gone to Rabbi Gamaliel. And Rabbi Gamaliel will have cross examined the young Saul and finally said to him: Come follow me. (You may have heard another greater Rabbi, say those words to lesser people than this Saul.) To say you were a disciple of Gamaliel, that's like saying you sat at Billy Graham's feet. That's a big Ooh.

I would find it very disconcerting to have Saul, before he became Paul, in Church. I would be very nervous, I'd be thinking there is nothing that I can teach this man and he has a better answer than I do for everything! It would be quite scary.

Saul's next role was to work for the Sanhedrin and to persecute this new Jewish cult. This is in the days before it was given the derisory nickname of Christian – and it was called then The Way. Saul got followers of Jesus arrested and imprisoned and he acknowledges that he affectively killed Stephen.

The next thing that happens is Paul gets his Damascus conversion. If we were making a Hollywood movie, we would have God telling Saul what he really thought of him and then punishing him to hell before killing him in a nasty and gruesome way. That's what Hollywood does to baddies and Saul is a baddy. But God doesn't do that.

I was reading this week of Joachim Von Ribbentrop, Hitler's foreign minister. He was found guilty of war crimes at the Nuremberg Trials. He was at first very sceptical of the Christian faith, but over a number of

months, he changed his mind. And this is what he said just before he was hanged for war crimes: “I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul.”

Some of you may not feel very comfortable with that declaration of faith – is this man to so easily escape hell?

There’s a part of us that looks at the life of Paul and says Well at least he made atonement for his own sins – at least he went on to live a good life – to travel the world and tell people about Jesus at great risk to himself, but fair enough, he had done bad things – but that would be to seriously misunderstand St Paul and all that he stood for and spoke about. The rest of Paul’s life is not dedicated to making himself look good in the eyes of God, it is a life dedicated to thanking God for all that God has done.

Ananias comes to a blind Saul – and lets not go into the fear and the faith that Ananias needed to obey God in this. And note how Paul makes a point, as he did earlier of saying I trained under Gamaliel, look at my excellent Jewish credentials, now he says this man – Ananias, he too is a devout observer of the Law, highly respected. So Paul is doing everything he can to tell the crowd what has happened to him, in a way that will build bridges.

Very bold people can talk about Jesus in a really in your face kind of So what are you going to do about it! sort of way. And very shy people hope that no one will ask them anything about Church because we’re too afraid to say boo to a goose. Meanwhile Paul manages to find a way that keeps these people listening. Ananias stands before blind Paul and says Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

Wash your sins away - It’s just astonishing that it can be that simple, that straightforward, to be free of the guilt and the burden that you carry. Paul dips himself into a mikvot, a Jewish ceremonial bath, he baptises himself in the name of his new rabbi, the promised messiah, and he emerges a free man, a new man.

I wonder if it is that easy. When you propose to your fiancé, it’s a pretty simple formula of words, when she accepts, it’s a pretty simple word she has to say. But just because the act is simple doesn’t make it any less potent and glorious. St Paul finds that Jesus has atoned for his sins. I think for Paul it involved a very big swallowing of humble pie. Perhaps that sounds quite simple but I still find people for whom it’s too much to ask.

A couple of weeks ago a man in the school playground said to me – and it really was pretty much in passing – When you realise that the gospels are an historical document then faith in Jesus falls into place. The next day, a woman says to me: It’s not about understanding more of Jesus, but about knowing him. Here are people growing in faith and the difference is Jesus. I wonder if they even know it! I haven’t known them very long but when I first came across them I don’t think that any of them would have called themselves Christian. But they are now, I’m not entirely sure how but that’s Jesus for you!

Ananias says to Paul - What are you waiting for? For me this is my favourite question of the day – what are you waiting for – another miracle? More proof? More intellectual reasoning? The sure knowledge that everything will be alright and you won’t have fun poked at you?

I wonder if Paul was aware that there were incredible hardships that lay ahead of him. Floggings and beatings and shipwrecks and finally beheading. I think if God had told me about that lot and then asked me to sign up I’d’ve said No thank you!

And I've met people who won't become Christians, not because it isn't true but because they're afraid that God might ask them to go somewhere and do something. Don't worry about that, I've never met someone who didn't feel called by God to go where they ended up. Of course they have usually gone with fear and trepidation but that's the adventure of life!

I do not know what will happen tomorrow, but it is enough for me to know that Jesus will be with me, even tomorrow.

When Luke came to write up this book, the Acts of the Apostles, he put this Damascus conversion in here three times. That's absurd, one really good version is more than enough! But if you look at them you see how Paul talks about what has happened to him and he says the same thing each time, but he tries to use vocab and turns of phrases that are not going to put the listener off.

There's probably a message for us here. To be bold like Paul in talking about what God has done for us. But also to think through what kind of imagery and words are going to help or hinder? The trouble is that at some point or other you will end up saying something that will either win your listener over or it will prove to be a stumbling block. It could be the simplicity of the forgiveness of sins.

In this case it is the word Gentile that re-ignites the crowd – they'd be quite happy for us Gentiles to hear about Judaism and to learn to be good God-fearers but they wouldn't be so happy with the idea that even Gentiles can be right with God and We can be right without having to jump through some serious hoops, without having to make atonement for our own sins.

So the crowd goes wild, throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air. It's quite a scene. The Commander Claudius Lysias (see Ac23.26) orders Paul to be flogged but it turns out that Paul is not only a good Jew he is also a good Roman. And that's an embarrassing problem for the Commander. We'll come to that in another sermon.

Today isn't really a teaching kind of sermon – a Do this, Don't do that sermon. Instead we get to listen to Paul and what's happened to him and No matter where you are in your struggles and doubts you have to conclude that the impact of Jesus on Paul's life has been astonishing. And that helps us on days when we wonder why we bother. May Gods open our eyes to see the good things God has done for us and in us and through us.

We get to see how Paul deals with some nasty opposition and we see that this grace, this forgiveness that Paul has known has gone deep down into Paul. It's not just an On the surface sort of faith. And this calls us to a deeper faith – for some of you that might be about putting more learning into your head, for others it might be about letting Jesus deeper into your past, into your heart. Paul keeps his calm and tells his story. And it brings me back to the question that Ananias asked him – What are you waiting for? The original question is asked in terms of commitment – get baptised! Get committed, get on with your life of faith.

If you can have a go at answering that question then turn it into a prayer!

We now have a prayer corner, come and use it, - if you'd like someone to pray with you then just come here and someone will appear and pray with you if you'd like that. There's a prayer board, write it up and we'll pray for you.

Be encouraged by the conversion of Paul – not everyone gets a Damascus conversion – that's not the point, the point is that Jesus made the difference – let what happened to Paul and his life encourage you. And let it also challenge you to a deeper faith – What are you waiting for?