

## **Paul's conversion. Acts 9. 22/1/23**

I have here a banana. Why? Because it reminds me of a journey my Grandmother made..... I only remember her as an old lady. I was told that Grandma didn't eat bananas. There was a reason for this dislike. She was a country girl from a little village in North Devon. The biggest town she had ever been to, was Barnstaple. When she left school there was no work for her locally but somehow, she was given a job in a cake shop in London, so she was put on a train to the big city, and someone gave her a banana to eat. It put her off them for life. London was so different. It must have been such a culture shock and I guess she was very homesick. That journey changed her life completely, and she always associated bananas with that train journey.

We've just heard the story of the journey of Paul, or Saul as he was known then, that changed his life forever in an even more dramatic way. He was a devout Jew and if he had asked himself, before this story began, "How can I best serve God?" He would have answered "By destroying the Christian church." That was his mission.

To the Christians who had fled from Jerusalem to escape persecution, hoping to find a safe place in towns like Damascus, Paul was a terrifying character. And he was powerful. He had obtained authority from the high priest to arrest any followers of Jesus and take them back to Jerusalem to stand trial for their faith. But on that road to Damascus, God steps in and literally knocks him off his feet.

The intensity of the light that shines around him is enough to blind him and he has to be led by the hand. Instead of being in charge and in control, he has to rely on other people to lead him. He's in a state of shock and he neither eats nor drinks for three days.

But it was the voice that spoke to him in the bright light that made the most impression. When he asks, "Who are you?" the voice says "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." That really stopped him in his tracks. Here he was suddenly being faced by an encounter with a very real Jesus who was alive, and appearing in the most mysterious and powerful way that could only mean he was divine. This was just what the Christians were claiming. Jesus had risen from the dead, and had ascended into heaven because he was the Son of God. These were the very beliefs that Paul was trying to stamp out!

Now he was forced to admit that Jesus was not some rebellious pseudo-prophet who had led people astray from the Jewish faith and then been crucified. That was not the end of the story of Jesus.

And for Paul this was only the beginning. God was also preparing the next part of Paul's journey by appearing to Ananias in a vision, telling him that Paul was to be given the job of taking the Gospel to the Gentiles and their kings as well as the people of Israel, and that he would have to suffer for the name of Jesus.

Ananias is a disciple. At first he has a "McEnroe moment" – "You want me to go and see Saul, from Tarsus? God, you cannot be serious". But despite his misgivings and his questions, he does what he is asked to do, and he does it well. No words of condemnation had come from the voice of Jesus speaking to Paul on the road, and neither do they come from Ananias now. What's the first thing he says to this

notorious persecutor of the church? “Brother Saul.” He lays hands on Paul who is filled with the Holy Spirit and quite soon afterwards he begins to fulfil the task that God has given him. He preaches in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

What a turnaround! Paul spends the rest of his life preaching Jesus. He gives up his career as a promising Pharisee, although he never gave up his Jewishness. He gives up a settled life in favour of endless arduous and perilous journeys. Despite being a proud Roman citizen, he is frequently arrested, beaten, driven out of towns, and imprisoned. He is constantly in conflict, even with other church leaders. He is misunderstood, has his patience severely tested by some of the young churches that he founds, and he has to cope with some kind of physical ailment he calls his “thorn in the flesh”.

The man who once seemed so strong and unassailable, allows himself to become vulnerable and open to hardship. In fact, he describes himself as a slave to Christ.

His life becomes a reflection of the self-giving love of Jesus, who allowed himself to be vulnerable, and to suffer for us all. The means by which God offered us reconciliation and a renewed relationship was through the death of Jesus. The sort of death that was reserved for the lowest slaves and criminals.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and spiritual writer, says this: “Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who have no spine and who let everyone else make the decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly.”

If, after his conversion, Paul had asked himself that question again: “How can I best serve God?” He would have answered “by following Jesus”.

He trusted that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God had forgiven him, re-started his life, and made him, in his own words, a “new creation”. He gave up the right to control his own life (how many of us do that?) and became, not a person of his own making, but the person that God made him.

But despite the trials he faced he was always clear about one thing. Disciples may face hardships, they may take risks, they may become vulnerable, but they are never overcome. They are never overcome because of their close connection to Jesus who was victorious over the power of evil. They are never overcome because nothing can separate them from the love of God.

Let’s just go back and remember what Jesus said when he appeared to Paul: “Why do you persecute me?” Not, why are you persecuting the church, but why are you persecuting me. What a remarkable question. Here is Jesus, from his throne in heaven, still aligning himself with those who believe in him and are living for him, in such a way that he suffers with those who are being persecuted. This is how closely he is connected to his followers. It’s as if he is saying ‘these people are mine and I am with them when they suffer as well as rejoicing over them.

How can we best serve God? By following Jesus. How can we best follow Jesus? By staying connected to him and to our fellow believers, because God works through people. As he did when he sent Ananias. He knew how dangerous it was to put himself in contact with someone who was breathing out murderous threats.

But he took a risk, because God asked him to, and because he trusted that God knew what he was doing. And so he became the means by which Paul received the Holy Spirit, regained his sight, and immediately began to tell others the truth about Jesus.

And so Paul became part of the church, part of that company of people that Jesus is so intimately connected to. As he grew in his understanding, he described the church as the body of Christ: a body made of many parts – all are different and all are necessary for the correct functioning of the body. Who here is an ear? (Perhaps the person on the sound desk?) Who is a foot? (The person who goes shopping for a friend who can't get out.) Maybe you're a bit that's hidden away and though not visible is still vital (like someone who goes to their room, shuts the door and prays). Whichever bit you are, you're important. If you were not here, we would be incomplete.

Paul joined the Christians in Damascus and in many other places, sharing their persecution and their triumphs.

Who knows what will happen to us on our journey of faith? God may stop us in our tracks and reorient us, so that we're going in the right direction. We may find, like Paul that we become less in control of our lives, more vulnerable, but we will not be overcome, because Jesus is intimately connected to us as members of his body, sharing our sorrows and joys and giving us the abundant life that we can find nowhere else.