

Acts 9:1-20**John 21:1-19**

Introduction

I'd like you all to close your eyes and keep them closed until I ask you to open them.

Now .. can anyone tell me the precise time? Do you know how many people there are in church this morning? What expression is on the face of the person next to you? Open your eyes.

Why was that difficult? Because we couldn't see. Sight is very important in order for us to carry out our daily lives. It helps us to know where we are, what is going on around us and enables us to interact with others. Our story this morning tells us about two men who had their sight or vision altered. Firstly it tells us of Saul, how he lost his physical sight and gained spiritual sight and in doing so was changed for ever to the extent that even his name changed from Saul, a Jewish name (meaning desired) to Paul a Roman name (meaning little - writers of the period suggest he was less than 5ft tall) and Ananias, who had his vision of what God wanted to do altered and by trusting God to direct him in what seemed to be a dangerous direction fulfilled God's purpose and transformed the lives of thousands through the conversion of St Paul

The first time we meet Saul in the Bible he is present at the death of Stephen. In fact he is standing by minding the coats of the people who were throwing rocks at Stephen and Luke tells us that although he wasn't actively involved Saul approved of Stephen's death. In the next chapter we are told that Saul was one of the main people involved in persecuting Christians and how he dragged believers from their homes and threw them into jail.

Saul was a well-educated and fervent Jew. He had been born in Tarsus in Syria which meant he grew up immersed in the Greek and Roman cultures and was in fact a Roman citizen. He was a Pharisee trained by Gamaliel, one of the foremost scholars of the day, and had a great knowledge of the Jewish law. He was also fanatically committed to his beliefs and was opposed to Christianity. He didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah and was working to stop what he perceived as heresy spreading by persecuting and arresting Christians.

On the way to Damascus in pursuit of Christians something happened to transform Saul, his way of thinking and his whole life. We are told that he met with the risen Jesus in an experience that was so overwhelming that he fell to the ground and completely lost his sight. He arose from the ground physically blind but his spiritual

Acts 9:1-20**John 21:1-19**

vision, which had been blind to the truth about Jesus was illuminated and his personal encounter with the risen Lord made him accept that Jesus was the Messiah, and was risen from the dead as the Christians had been preaching.

He had been able to see but spiritually he had been blinded to the truth. In his encounter with Jesus his spiritual eyes were opened but he became blind physically. God met with Saul in his physical weakness and when he healed him through Ananias he was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw things from a completely different perspective; That of a believer.

Spiritually speaking the transformation for Paul was instantaneous. The encounter with Jesus meant that things changed instantly and for ever. He had been so sure that Jesus was dead yet here he was experiencing the same vision of the risen Christ that Stephen had seen as he died. His eyes were opened and his world-view was transformed.

For many of us this transformation is more of a process than an event. For some of us the process began so early in our lives as we were brought up to know and love Jesus that we can't remember a time when our spiritual eyes were not open and when we didn't know and love Jesus. For others of us it has been a slow movement through life from questioning and lack of understanding to a knowledge and love of Jesus. Others still may feel that they are still in the dark or the gloom and not quite sure what they believe about Jesus or what his place is in their lives. Whatever our own personal experience may be the fact is that a personal encounter with Jesus changes us forever.

So let's look at what happened to Paul

1. Physically.

He fell to the ground and was blinded by the light. Sometimes when we meet very personally with God there may be physical effects and it can be a very emotional experience.

2. He heard Jesus speaking to him.

God speaks to us all. He created us and wants to be in contact with us and have a place in our lives. It can take a while to realise that this is happening and to recognise his voice in our hearts and minds. You can be sure that in Saul's case that voice would be easily recognised on other occasions. When we have allowed Jesus

Acts 9:1-20**John 21:1-19**

into our hearts and minds we can expect to hear him speaking to us.

He became a Christian and he started a new life. We can tell that because:

3. He called Jesus Lord.

Saul didn't immediately know who it was who he met on the road but he recognised that it was someone he should respect and worship. He called him Kurios which means Lord or master and is used for people in power or authority. Jesus became Saul's Lord and master and he acknowledged his power and authority in his life. For all of us there needs to be a point at which we acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and allow him authority in our lives, whether we have always known and loved him or whether we have only recently learned to know and love him. Acknowledging Jesus as Lord leads directly to

4. Obedience. Saul obeyed Jesus.

He got up and went - or more correctly was led into the city by his companions and there he waited to be told what he should do. God knows us through and through and knows what we need most in our lives and we need to trust him and obey him. Saul's obedience meant Annanias was able to find him and was able to pray for him to receive his sight and the Holy Spirit in his life. We need to learn not only to hear Jesus speaking to us but learn to obey his commands both from the Bible, which tells us God's general will for us, and when he speaks to us personally. We need to be listening to what he wants us to do for him in our daily lives and be ready to obey.

Allowing Jesus control in his life meant that he began to grow as a Christian. He didn't stay as a baby he became a young Christian who gained strength and power day by day.

5. He was converted - turned around, transformed.

He stopped persecuting Christians, he came to believe personally in Jesus and so great was the change in him that he actually went to the synagogues and began preaching that Jesus was the Son of God. He became mature and able to teach others and pass on his faith to them

6. He fulfilled God's purpose for him

Acts 9:1-20**John 21:1-19**

God told Ananias (in verse 15) that he had chosen Saul to serve him and make his name known to Gentiles and to Kings and to the people of Israel . God had a purpose for his life and he has a purpose for each of us. As we allow him to lead us and as we grow in faith and obedience he can use us to serve him just as he used Saul.

and finally Saul, now Paul died for his faith. We too will die but that isn't the end for us because it means that we inherit eternal life and will live forever with our Lord.

Ananias was a believer, clearly committed to serving God and also prayerful. While he was praying God spoke to him and transformed his expectations of how God would work. Saul was well known through the region as a powerful man with good connections who was fiercely opposed to Christianity and determined to persecute believers to stop them spreading the Gospel.

Yet God called Ananias to go and lay hands on Saul to restore his lost sight. Ananias' response was immediate and very human - and actually very logical. "Lord," he said, "This man is a known enemy of Christians, he has come here to harm believers - and you want me to go and pray for his healing?"

Ananias couldn't understand God's purposes or the amazing love that motivates him. In human terms the best thing to do with an enemy is to avoid them. In God's terms the best thing to do with an enemy is to bring them to faith in him, to bridge the gap that separates them from him, to forgive and restore them and bring them to relationship with him.

Jesus understood that very well. He went to those who were separated from him by sin and disobedience; he preached salvation to the sinner and healing to the sick. The religious leaders thought these were the people to be avoided, God knows these are the people we are to seek out. More than that God wanted to use Paul for his own purposes. This was the man he had chosen to preach the gospel to the nations, to reach out to gentiles, non-Jews, everywhere.

Acts 9:1-20

John 21:1-19

Paul was ideally suited to the task, being a Roman citizen, educated as a Greek and steeped in knowledge of the Jewish faith and having had an overwhelming conversion in his meeting with Jesus was full of passion to proclaim the Gospel to others

When we think about sharing our faith I think that here are some people that we stay away from, some people that we secretly believe are beyond God's reach, some people who we think it may not be worth spending time and energy with.

What God showed Ananias was that this is absolutely wrong thinking. There is no-one beyond God's reach and even someone who appears to be absolutely opposed to the Christian faith can come to know him when he encounters Jesus directly. God has his own purposes and plans for each and every individual. It isn't up to us to decide who is within God's reach and who we can leave alone. We are called to show God's love to everyone, to share the gospel with all we meet and all God calls us to minister to and we are called to bring God's healing and compassion into their situations.

In Ananias's thinking Saul was the last person in the world he should seek out to share the Gospel with. In God's thinking Saul was his priority.

I wonder how much courage it took Ananias to obey God and seek Saul out? It must have been a desperately difficult thing to do and I can imagine him quaking with fear, yet he knew and loved God, he spoke to him regularly so he knew it was God speaking to him, he recognised his command and he trusted God; firstly to care for him and secondly to fulfil his purposes - even in what seemed a crazy way

So meeting with Jesus transformed Saul's life and stretched Ananias's understanding of how God wanted him to serve him. It transforms us as well. Have you been transformed? Are you continuing to grow and develop in your faith like Saul did? Are you looking at different possibilities as Ananias did?

The key thing is that we should be making space in our lives to meet with Jesus, to listen to him and to have the courage to respond when we do