

## **Sermon for Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> May 2022, Year C, Easter 3**

**Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden**

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

**Saul's Conversion; Jesus makes breakfast for the disciples.**

I am very fond of both these two scenes in Acts and John's gospel. When I first came to faith at college at the age of 20, I went around calling myself Tess of Tarsus because I identified so much with Saul of Tarsus as he experienced a radical change of heart about followers of the Jesus Way. Before that, I was an angry atheist who spent quite a lot of time debating with Christians about the stupidity of their beliefs, but at the same time I was really envious of their kindness and friendship with one another. I remember saying some deliberately mean things to one Christian student and being shocked when he didn't get angry back but simply apologised for upsetting me.

Then, I found I really wanted to believe. I longed to be included and welcomed among these Christians who could be so kind to me even when I was hostile and cruel to them. Unfortunately, as a mathematics undergraduate being trained in proofs and logic, I found it really hard to accept that God could exist. I hadn't understood that belief is more about a developing relationship with a loving God, than being intellectually convinced about his existence.

I did eventually manage to convince myself through some tortuous mental gymnastics, but it *was* all intellectual – my heart hadn't changed in the slightest and I was as angry as before, only now I argued against the atheists, instead of against the Christians. Unsurprisingly, my faith didn't last very long, and I quickly went back to being a terrible cynic about the Christian faith for the next fifteen years or so.

Fortunately, Saul, or Paul as he became known, was not converted by intellectual arguments, but by encountering Jesus. Jesus simply asks, “Why are you persecuting me?” and that is enough for Paul to realise that he has not been attacking an abstract philosophy, but a real person, with real feelings, real love in fact. For Paul, it was no longer an intellectual exercise in being the most righteous, educated, and observant Jew – that sort of thing is only important when God’s never likely to show up in person and your religion is all about social status. As soon as anyone has any kind of personal experience of God’s love, all that intellectual stuff rather goes out of the window.

Not that Paul suddenly forgets his intellectual training; in his many letters to the churches, he writes some of the most astonishing and erudite theology we have. But in them he spends almost all his time trying to persuade us to love more and argue about religious rules less.

I do sometimes wonder if he’s forgotten that most people haven’t had his ‘road to Damascus’ experience and can’t quite relate to what he’s saying. I have a similar problem: most of my understanding of God’s love comes from my 2 years as a novice nun. But how can I preach about it to those who haven’t had that experience?

Fortunately, we have these bible stories, to remind us how the different disciples encounter Jesus in different ways after his resurrection. Mary Magdalene meets Jesus alone in the peaceful garden by the empty tomb. Paul meets Jesus in a blinding light of glory. Peter and John on the other hand, and the other disciples, are presented with a breakfast barbeque on the beach.

I love how mundane this encounter is. Before they go fishing, I can imagine the disciples sitting around at dusk and poking a fire with a stick, not saying much, but sitting in companionable nostalgic silence, reflecting on all that’s happened since they grew up with Jesus in Galilee. Not for them the instant conversion, late in the day. They were there at the start, caught up in the crazy mission of

the carpenter's son turned itinerant rabbi, turned messiah, turned enemy of the state. Now they stare into the gathering gloom, trying to make sense of an incomprehensible resurrection.

Peter gets to his feet and says, "I'm going fishing" in much the same way an old boy of our generation might say "I'm going to the allotment". It's not about the fishing, or the gardening, it's about dealing with our emotions by keeping busy. And then the others stand as well. "We will go with you". Solidarity. Who else could understand? They need to be together, even if they don't know what to say.

Did you notice Peter and John the Beloved Disciple both act in a similar way in this scene as they do on Easter day when they run to the tomb? John is the one who gets there first, but his response is reserved and cautious. He outruns Peter to the tomb, but he doesn't go in. Now, he is first to recognise Jesus waiting on the shore, but his response is just to tell Peter who he's seen. Peter on the other hand goes straight into the tomb without hesitation, and in our reading today he immediately puts on clothes and impulsively leaps into the water to reach Jesus first.

This is why for many theologians, John has come to represent the more reflective, contemplative response to Jesus, while Peter has a more fervent emotional response. And Paul, we might say, is the intellectual theologian, full of passion after discovering that love transcends everything. And not to forget the others with their different gifts: James the organiser of the church in Jerusalem; Thomas who has the courage to express his doubts that we all share; And Mary Magdalene who was loyal and refused to give up hope even when the other disciples had scattered in fear; Martha of Bethany who gave Jesus a good tongue-lashing on at least a couple of occasions, but loved him deeply nevertheless.

I feel like we should do one of those online quizzes: Which disciple are you?

The point I'm taking away from this is that there's no one way to be a Christian, to be a lover of Jesus Christ and a follower of his Way. Imagine the disciples at our holy communion; Peter might run up to the altar rail impulsively to meet the Lord. John would follow, gently and reverently. Thomas holds up the bread, not completely convinced that it's the body of Christ. Mary Magdalene has lovingly done the flowers for fifty years, mostly unseen. James is the churchwarden, organising the collections. Paul is writing a deep theological article about the Trinitarian meaning of the 153 fishes, for the parish magazine. Mary of Bethany weeps, kneeling with joy and sorrow, wiping the feet of the priest with her hair. Honestly, I don't recommend you try that one, you might give me a shock.

This is what Christian community looks like. It shouldn't work, because we're all so different, but it does work because at some deep level God has put his same Spirit in all of us. We sit companionably in silence like the disciples, and then perhaps someone says, "I am going for communion" (or 'I am going to matins) and the rest stand up and say "We will come with you" – or as we Anglicans put it "and also with you". And there Jesus is, waiting, at the altar, as on the beach. "Come and have breakfast" says Love. And so, we did sit, and eat.