

The unlikely Christian

Today is the third Sunday of Easter, a significant day in the life of the church. Many people, though, will be celebrating today, not because it's the third Sunday, and not because their preferred football team won last night, and not even because their preferred party or candidate was elected last night. Many people will be celebrating today, because today is International Star Wars Day. If you didn't know, you might think that International Star Wars Day remembers the release of the first movie or George Lucas' birthday – but no, it's about the date. May the Fourth... as in the Star Wars catch phrase, 'May the force be with you.'

As I've shared before, my generation is the last to remember the world before Star Wars. I saw the first movie soon after its release in 1977, when we met the hero, Luke Skywalker, and the villain, Darth Vader, the second, the Empire Strikes Back in 1980, when we learned that Darth Vader was Luke Skywalker's father, and then the last one, Return of the Jedi, in 1983 which climaxed in Darth Vader turning to the light side and saving his son!

Based on what we'd seen in the first two movies, there was no way that Darth Vader would do that – what a shock it was!

As we turn to our reading from the book of Acts today, we see a similarly shocking change in character.

Saul's first mention in the book of Acts is at the end of chapter 7 (7:58)– where he's present at Stephen's trial – and then right at the beginning of chapter 8 (8:1), where it's noted that Saul approved of the outcome of that trial – the stoning of Stephen.

Following Stephen's execution, a great persecution broke out against the church and Saul was at the forefront – “breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples”, as we learned at the opening of our reading from Acts. Saul went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any followers of Jesus there, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem... probably for a fate like Stephen's.

Sometimes, when persecutions take place, perpetrators make claims like “I was just following orders” or “I was just going along with what everyone else was doing”, but Luke – the author of the book of Acts – makes it clear that Saul was going above and beyond that – he was approving of, not just watching – the stoning of Stephen, and before he set out for Damascus, he made sure he had the paperwork in place for what he was going to do there.

Paul says in chapter 26 of the book of acts “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.” (Acts 26:9-11)

Saul saw the followers of Jesus as a threat to the nation and a blasphemy against God. Saul was passionate in his efforts – he earnestly believed he was right, and that he was doing the right thing – the right thing by the people, and the right thing by God.

But, as we know from history – and probably from our own experience, too - people who earnestly and sincerely believe that they are right can sometimes be terribly, terribly wrong.

At the start of our reading today, Saul set out to Damascus to earnestly, sincerely, passionately and zealously persecute the Christians there. And not just to make life hard for them, but to arrest them, and drag them back to Jerusalem.

But something happened on the road to Damascus.

And it is something hugely important in the history of the church. It's so important, that the book of Acts gives us three separate accounts: here in chapter 9, then in chapter 22, and for a third time in chapter 26.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (9:3-4)

It was a supernatural experience – which some people will explain away, possibly as heat stroke, with him becoming lightheaded, falling to the ground and hallucinating, or as him being struck by lightning and imagining he heard a voice, or even as an epileptic fit.

But people often try to explain away the supernatural of God with the natural. We are often more comfortable with the natural than the supernatural.

We are told here, though that was a bright light and an audible voice, and however you might like to explain it, it has a profound effect on Saul. Not only was it physically confronting for him, but there was a psychological effect as well. His world-view, his belief system, fell apart in an instant. Saul was confronted by the very God, he thought – he was certain – he was defending.

The voice says "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me." Saul knew he hadn't been persecuting God – he'd been persecuting the followers of Jesus! Why would God be saying that he was persecuting him?

It didn't make sense, so Paul responded by asking, "Who are you, Lord?"

And the response is shocking – perhaps more shocking to Saul than the blinding light and the voice itself – because the voice replies. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!"

Not "You are persecuting my followers" but "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." This follows on from Jesus saying in Matthew's gospel, "For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' (Matthew 25:42-45)

Saul had been persecuting Christians, so he had effectively been persecuting Christ.

Saul, the pharisee of pharisees, was a man of conviction, a man of certainty, he had known what was right and had prosecuted the wrongdoers to the full extent he could.

But, on the road to Damascus, things changed. He became an unlikely – perhaps the most unlikely – follower of Jesus. Saul became Paul, and his life was dramatically changed. Paul helps us to understand that this is a principle that is true for everyone. In 1 Corinthians 5:17, Paul

writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away; behold, all things become new.” Paul is giving us more than a theological principle - he is speaking from personal experience. When people get to know Jesus, they are changed, just as Paul was.

There is a transformation. We change. We’re not made perfect, but over time, we are made better. As our beliefs change, so must our behaviour.

Jesus told Saul to get up and go into the city, and where he would be told what he must do.

The men who’d been travelling with Saul had to lead him into the city, because he’d been blinded by the encounter. We heard that he waited there for three days, not eating or drinking anything.

The narrative then switched to Ananias, with God telling him to go to Saul and lay hands on him.

They may not have had mass communication in the first century AD, but news still travelled. Ananias had heard of Saul – and knew his reputation well: “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” (9:13-14)

Saul was a man with reputation and power and authority, and Ananias was one of the people in Damascus that Saul would have dragged back to Jerusalem in chains. He was rightly afraid of what God was asking him to do.

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” (9:15-16)

God tells him again to go to Saul. Ananias’ fears are swept aside as God tells him what great plans there are for this converted Pharisee.

So Ananias went to the house – I imagine very nervously – and went inside and saw Saul. Blind and weakened by three days of fasting, and Ananias reached out and touched him and called him brother.

We heard that, immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again.

I imagine there was relief all round. Saul who was blind and weak and defenceless, was brought into fellowship and had his sight restored. Ananias who was fearful, got to witness the power of God in changing Saul and restoring his sight.

We heard that Saul got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. After that he spent several days with the disciples in Damascus and began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Saul was an unlikely Christian. He was a persecutor and a hater, but he was changed. Despite his past, he was accepted into the church.

Up until his experience on the road, Saul had been persecuting the followers of Jesus, but now he was worshipping and having fellowship with them. He became a preacher of the gospel, and would go on to share that gospel to the gentiles as well as the people of Israel.

We know from Galatians 1: 16-17 that Saul did not stay long in Damascus. He went to the desert of Arabia, there to be alone with the Lord – just as Jesus had gone into the wilderness prior to the start of his ministry. After his time in the desert, he returned to Damascus for a short time, before making his way back to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18)

The story of Saul's conversion should remind us never to write any one off as being beyond the love of Jesus. We may do that with friends or family who have rejected the good news of Jesus years, or were once part of the life of the church but have drifted away. But let's not underestimate the power of God (and we do have a tendency to do that!), the scriptures are clear. The story of Saul is clear.

All of us who come to know Jesus have our own stories – most of them won't be nearly as dramatic as Saul's – but they're still stories of God's love and grace. Many of our stories will involve people like Ananias who reached out to us, and loved us, even when we were quite unlovable.

Saul, who became Paul, was an unlikely Christian.

And all of us, I think, are unlikely Christians too. But we are all called to be part of his church – not because of what we've done, but because of God's great love for us, and what Jesus did for us, in his life and death.

Amen