

Compline Talks 2020, Prof John Morris

1st Sunday after Trinity; Sunday June 14th; Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 3; Collects 1,3,5,7

To provide a follow on from Pentecost and Trinity, but to avoid duplicating the study of Acts which I know a number of bible study groups are doing, I thought we might look at Paul, at his dramatic conversion, then at the restoration of his sight by Ananias, and then at some of his letters. I'm not sure if I gathered from Martin's pause for prayer the other day that he had some negative issues with Paul – perhaps he will get back to me – we shall see. I think, however, that whatever your views on Paul, it is universally acknowledged that he has had an enormous and lasting influence on Christian beliefs and practice.

We first meet Paul in the book of Acts at the end of Chapter 7. You'll remember that this was in the very early days of the Christian movement, when the number of disciples was growing quickly and they held everything in common, having sold their possessions so that they could supply all their members according to their needs. We read also that there were disagreements between those who spoke Greek and those who spoke Hebrew. As is often the case, the disagreement was sparked off by money. The Greek speakers thought that the widows among them were being overlooked in the daily distribution of supplies. The twelve apostles called a meeting at which they concluded it would be very wrong of them to spend time on such matters because they should be at prayer or preaching. That was when they elected Stephen and six others to do these more mundane tasks. But we are told that Stephen was a man 'full of faith and of the Holy Spirit'. It seems, however, that Stephen was not content as a 'backroom boy' and, being 'full of grace and power', began to work great miracles and signs among the people. He was clearly also very vocal, and got into arguments with a group called 'The Synagogue of Freedmen' who, having been bested in argument by Stephen, and in order to get their own back, accused him of blasphemy and had him arrested. When questioned before the High Priest, Stephen apparently delivered a lengthy diatribe which started from Abraham, went on to that day, and ended by saying that not only had their fathers persecuted the prophets, but also that those who were sitting in judgement on him had both murdered Jesus and also failed to keep the Law as it had been given to them. Stephen clearly thought that attack was the best form of defence! Not surprisingly everything got very heated and when Stephen, looking up, said that he could see Jesus standing at God's right hand, they took him outside the city and set about stoning him for blasphemy. And this is where we first hear of Saul or Paul, because those doing the stoning asked Saul, then a fairly young man, to look after their coats – stoning, I guess, is hot work – and we read that Saul was among those who approved of Stephen's killing.

What do we know of the background of Saul that would explain him taking part in the stoning of a very vocal Christian? We can piece this together only gradually from Acts, Paul's letters, and other contemporary writings. He is often called Saul of Tarsus, and it is commonly assumed that he changed his name to Paul when he became a Christian, but that is not the case. His Jewish name was Saul (perhaps after the biblical king Saul) and he was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. Acts and Paul himself tell us that he was also a Roman citizen, and as such he also used the Latin equivalent of Saul, which is Paul. It was apparently common at that time for upper class Jews to have both a Hebrew and a Latin or a Greek name. You'll remember also that, during his conversion experience, he heard Jesus asking "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?", and when Ananias was sent to restore Saul's sight he refers to him as "Brother Saul". Paul's native tongue was almost certainly Greek, but he could also speak Hebrew.

Saul/Paul was probably born between 5 BC and 5 AD – and so was contemporary with Jesus. He was descended from a very devout pharisaic Jewish family based in the city of Tarsus which was a major university city and trade centre on the south coast of Galatia (modern Turkey), quite near Antioch. While still young, he was sent to Jerusalem to be educated at the school of Gamaliel, one of the

most noted rabbis in history. However, he was not training to be a rabbi and Acts notes that he was an artisan involved in leather-working and tent-making. Paul himself says that he was a Pharisee and so it is quite possible that he had heard about the very disparaging things Jesus said about the Pharisees during his ministry – you’ll remember he called Pharisees a ‘brood of vipers’. One interesting thing I learned in preparing this talk and which I had never before spotted from Acts and Romans is that two of Paul’s relatives, Andronicus and Junia were Christian converts *before* Paul was, and were prominent among the Apostles. You can almost hear the conversation around the Pauline dinner table “And do you know what, Andronicus and Junia have actually *joined* this awful Jesus movement which is so rude about our faith.”

So here we have an apparently well-to-do, very well-educated man from a very religious Pharisaic family who was well versed in Jewish teaching, who had been educated in Jerusalem and being deeply religious had probably heard about the teaching of Jesus, with whom he was contemporary, but who he would probably have regarded as a country bumpkin (Galileans were commonly thought by those in Jerusalem to be pious but rather conservative and backward; most were lower class, day labourers – you will remember Jesus’ parable about labourers being hired by the day). Furthermore, he may well have heard about Jesus’s attacks on Pharisaic practices and been very defensive on that score. But he was also someone who had two close relatives who were converts to this Jesus movement, which he despised and felt attacked and criticised by. Small wonder then that he felt moved to defend the faith of his family, the faith that he had grown up with and the faith in which he had been specifically educated. Small wonder also that, as he himself stated, he ‘persecuted beyond measure’ those who adhered to the Jesus movement, and specifically those Greek-speaking Jewish converts to Christianity who had returned to the Jerusalem area and who rather set themselves apart from the Hebrew Christians (such as Peter) and their continuing participation in the Temple worship. Small wonder, then, that Paul went to the High Priest and applied for letters to the synagogues at Damascus authorizing him ‘to arrest anyone who he found who followed the new way’ and to take them back to Jerusalem to be dealt with. Saul was certainly an activist for his faith.

Now we’ve got the background, we will leave the story there and return to it next week. What can we learn from all this? From the Stephen component of the story, I think three things. First, that if we are asked to do a relatively menial task that does not preclude us from spreading Christ’s message ‘Who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine’ comes to mind; it’s how we do the actions, not what we do that is important. Second, we learn that powerful religious groups – for us whether high or low church – tend to be conservative and not very open to critical discussion. Third, we learn that, when challenged about our faith, we should speak out without fear; the worst we in this country are likely to incur is some sort of ridicule; Christians in other countries may incur responses that are life-threatening.

Saul’s acquiescence to Stephen’s stoning teaches us not to stand by and watch if see something wrong being done, even if it ‘our’ religious group doing it. We clearly need to understand the basis of our faith, and like Saul should take steps to learn more about our faith, but it mustn’t just be an intellectual exercise which loses the real essentials about our relationship with our God and with other people. The little vignette about Andronicus and Julia reminds me that we can get particularly upset and defensive when people near and dear to us take up radically different religious positions. Finally, we learn that we must resist the temptation to strike out and hurt others when our own religious beliefs are challenged. Activism for the gospel message is absolutely vital, but it must be activism carried out with love.

Compline Talks 2020, Prof John Morris

Trinity 3; Sunday June 21st; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 1; Collects 2,4,6,7

This evening I'd like us to consider the dramatic conversion of Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus. We thought about his early life – the fact that he was a devout Pharisaic Jew from a religious family, trained in Jerusalem under a leading Rabbi of the time; someone who had very likely heard about the Jesus movement and Jesus' descriptions of Pharisees as 'white-washed tombs that look good from the outside, but are filled with dead-men's bones and all kinds of filth' – strong stuff indeed!; he was someone with relatives who had joined the Jesus movement, but who was himself convinced that it was his duty to arrest Greek-speaking Jewish converts to Christianity. Furthermore, he was someone with some power and influence – I guess not everyone could go to the High Priest and ask for authority to arrest Christians. And here he was, off to Damascus to do just that; breathing – as we read – 'murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord'.

So, now, let's read what happened at the start of Acts Ch9. "While he was still on the road and nearing Damascus, suddenly a light flashed from the sky all round him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Tell me, Lord' he said, 'who you are'. The voice answered, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you have to do.' Meanwhile the men who were travelling with him stood speechless; they heard the voice, but could see no-one. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could not see, so they led him by the hand and took him into Damascus. He was blind for three days, and took no food or drink." That account was of course written by the author of Acts, probably Luke, but Paul also refers to it – though not in much detail - in his letters. In his letter to the Corinthians he says that 'he (Christ) appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born' and, in Galatians, 'the gospel I preached is not of human origin ... I was not taught it, rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ' and he says 'I did not consult any human being' (although we know from elsewhere that he did have extensive meetings with the other apostles in Jerusalem).

Neither Acts nor Paul himself tell us what he was doing while on the way to Damascus, but it would have been a journey of many hot, tedious days. Tom Wright, in 'Acts for Everyone' suggests that Paul may have been undertaking a particular type of Jewish meditation, current at that time, which involved sustained contemplation of the great vision in the Ch 1 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel, in which Ezekiel sees something like a chariot with flashing lights and something that appeared in human form 'enclosed in .. a wonderful light all around'; that passage ends "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of 'YHWH'. Daily prayer and meditation and scripture study would certainly have been central to Paul's religious practice. So here was Paul, as he saw it on his way to act for the glory of God, the glory which he profoundly believed was being besmirched by the crazy followers of Jesus. To keep his mind firmly on his mission Wright suggests that Paul may have been trying to visualise Ezekiel's great vision, and suddenly in the midst of all that blazing light in his inner vision there - where he might have hoped to glimpse 'the glory of YHWH' – there appeared the face of Jesus! Indeed, in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul writes of 'seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah'. In other places too, Paul speaks of himself as an apostle because he has "seen Jesus our Lord".

Tom Wright's suggestion does not explain the 'falling to the ground' of the loss of sight; others have noted that translations vary as to whether those around saw a light or heard a voice, so we will leave that and concentrate on Paul himself. I hope you'll forgive me if, as a medic, I note that a number of neurologists have suggested that what Paul experienced – the bright light, voice with a strong religious message, falling to the ground, subsequent temporary blindness – was an attack of 'temporal lobe epilepsy'; indeed, in Ireland, epilepsy was known as St Paul's disease. Paul himself writes of a 'thorn in the flesh' which periodically troubled him, but there is no evidence what that

was. Others have challenged the epilepsy idea, noting the lack of convulsions and post-seizure memory loss and the three-day blindness. Yet others have suggested that the origin was more psychogenic in nature – what is called an ‘abreaction’ – the expression and consequent release of a previously repressed strong emotion. Was Paul was feeling very guilty about something in his past and seeking to combat this with his violence against those who he saw as not complying with the Law. Some scholars note Romans 7, where Paul talks of himself saying ‘The good that I want to do I fail to do; but I do the wrong that I don’t want to do; sin has its lodging in me.’ Yet others have suggested that Paul’s vision was nothing other than a hallucination resulting from the effects of the long journey and the heat on a bad conscience, but that is far too simplistic – it doesn’t explain either the immediate or long-term consequences. Whatever the reality – and we shall never know – there is no doubt that for Paul, this was a religious experience which completely changed his life and – more importantly for us – went on to change the lives of many people down the ages.

Intellectual Jews at that time were very interested in the idea of and, indeed, had a deep longing for the coming of a Messiah. They pictured the Messiah as a powerful ruler who would deliver their nation from Roman rule and restore the kingdom of Israel (we saw exactly that in the conversation that preceded Jesus’ ascension). They had little or no concept of a Messiah who was to suffer and to die. So, for Paul, when heard that this Jesus was being spoken of as a Messiah by Christians, most of whom he regarded as peasants from Galilee or others duped by them, this was a wholly repugnant. Paul’s mind was in turmoil. But mere rejection was not enough, as a zealous Pharisee he could do no less than to try to exterminate this sect which after Christ’s crucifixion had taken on a new life. He felt himself called to action. Paul had always wanted to lead a perfect life; had espoused Jewish idea that this just meant faithful observance of the Law in all the minutiae and complexity that had developed over the centuries. Now, he was confronted with another way of understanding God which in Christians brought a wonderful peace and joy of spirit. His reaction was to kick violently against it, but he cannot have been immune to what he saw of Stephen’s behaviour when he was stoned.

What is the take-home message from all this? First, we must remember that, like Paul, we and the way we think are very much the product of our upbringing. The tearing down of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol (here I should confess that I was educated at Colston’s School) reminds us that those brought up before the start of the 19th century did not consider the idea of owning slaves as wrong. Paul was brought up as a devout Jew – he didn’t initially question that. Many of us have been brought up in a Christian household, but Christian understanding has not been static for 2000 years – you have only to think of the burning of catholics by protestants and vice versa! We should constantly be testing our assumptions against the fundamentals (rather than the accretions) of our religious life. We should examine those things that we feel very strongly (perhaps even violently) about – and consider whether there is some element of consciously kicking against something that we subconsciously worry about in ourselves. Most of us are unlikely to have as dramatic encounters with Christ as did Paul – though some do. But that doesn’t mean that those who have had a conversion experience are somehow better as some evangelicals might imply. Like Paul we should be seeking to live as good a life as we can. In the sermon on the mount Jesus said ‘Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect’. So, as the saying goes “No pressure”! And, like Paul, we must be active for our faith, and that may be costly, though we are unlikely to suffer beatings, imprisonment, shipwreck and death.

Paul unexpectedly encountered the risen Christ in a very dramatic way on the Damascus road. We should constantly look out for Christ in our daily experiences and other people; Christ may be speaking to us through them. In the same way that he asked Paul “Paul, why are you doing this to me”. I have to ask whether in some way Jesus may be saying to me “John, why are you doing this to

me? I must ask where are my own points of blindness; andn pray that, as for Paul, with blessing, I may see more clearly as the ... fall from my eyes.
We talk of 'seeing the light' and 'enlightenment' when we suddenly grasp a concept that had previously eluded us, so the metaphor of Paul's conversion is still with us.

Compline 2020, Prof John Morris

Trinity 4; Sunday June 28th; Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 2; Collects 1, 3, 4, 7

Last week we considered the dramatic encounter of Saul/Paul with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus when on his mission to arrest Christian converts. As a result of that encounter we saw Saul, sightless, being led by the hand and being settled in a lodging in Damascus. We are told little about what happened during the next three days; only that he was blind and took no food or drink. The three days reminds us of the 3 days Jonah was in the whale before his change of heart, and the 3 days Jesus was in the tomb before his resurrection. Saul's three days were certainly a time when he would have been thinking about the life he had previously led, and what he would do thereafter. Mental confusion was combined with hunger and dehydration. We are, however, told that he was praying. Perhaps we can imagine him praying for restoration of his sight and asking God 'How could I have been so wrong? I was so certain I was doing what You wanted'.

What happened next is recorded in Acts Ch 9 and shifts our focus from Saul to Ananias. 'There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. He had a vision in which he heard the voice of the Lord: 'Ananias!' 'Here I am, Lord', he answered. The Lord said to him, 'Go at once to Straight Street, to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. You will find him at prayer; he has had a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him to restore his sight'. Ananias answered 'Lord, I have often heard about this man and all the harm he has done to thy people in Jerusalem. And here he is with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who invoke thy name' But the Lord said to him 'You must go, for this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before the nations and their kings, and before the people of Israel. I myself will show him all that he must suffer for my name's sake.' So Ananias went, found and entered the house, laid his hands on Saul and said 'Saul, my brother, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me to you so that you may recover your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And, immediately it seemed that scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Thereupon he was baptized, and afterwards he took food and his strength returned. He stayed some time with the disciples in Damascus.'

There is still a 'Straight Street' 'Darb el-Mustaquin' in Damascus; it is the main east-west thoroughfare with gates at either end and traders' booths on either side; tradition places the 'house of Judas' at its west end; and there's an underground structure known as the 'House of Saint Ananias'. Ananias was a common Jewish name; there's Ananias the High Priest who brought charges against Paul before the Roman Governor Felix; and the Ananias and his wife who were struck dead for withholding from the apostles part of the profit from a sale. The Ananias of Acts 9 was a Christian convert living in Damascus who, in Acts 22, is described as 'a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews'. Some have suggested that he was one of the disciples Jesus sent out in pairs to prepare towns for his arrival and that he was therefore well known to Jesus. There is a tradition that he later became a Bishop of Damascus and a martyr. At this point, however, Ananias clearly knew all about Saul's activities, 'harrying the church, seizing men and women and sending them to prison' and to their deaths. He must therefore have been a man of great courage. Although blind Saul was not an immediate threat, Ananias had no guarantee that Saul had changed from being an ardent persecutor who wished him imprisoned or worse. Nevertheless, whatever his fears – and he expressed them very clearly – Ananias trusted the power and wisdom of God. God didn't say to Ananias 'I know it's going to be difficult' – he just said "Go at once" and told Ananias that Saul was to be God's 'chosen instrument to proclaim to the Gentiles'. So Ananias went to accomplish his God-given mission, saying 'The Lord Jesus has sent me .. that you may regain your sight'. The message for us is clear – when we believe that we are asked to do something for Christ, even though we may instinctively feel it is dangerous (though we're unlikely to face the same danger as Ananias), our first response should be 'Here I am Lord' (this recalls the OT call of the boy Samuel living with the priest Eli) and wait for the instruction – however it may appear. Sometimes others may point the way; sometimes it may come only after anxious prayer.

We will often be apprehensive when we feel called to do something difficult; and worry that we shan't know what to say however hard we rehearse. The message here is simply 'trust, and you will be given the right words.'

It's worth noting that Ananias started by saying 'Brother Saul'. The 'brother' says 'I'm one with you'. Ananias clearly knows Jesus' command '.. I say to you love your enemy; do good to them that hate you'. Ananias teaches us that, if we are to be messengers of the gospel, we must not only love those we might consider enemies but also trust that the gospel has redemptive power. Ananias does not mention Saul's earlier activities, he just gives a word of encouragement and empathy; then lays his hand on Saul, and Saul's vision is restored. The vision of Jesus on the Damascus road had left Saul blind; an appropriate metaphor because, up to that point, he had been blind to the truth of the gospel. In a sense, Saul needed to lose his sight in order to regain it. He was unable to see clearly what God wanted unless his old way of seeing things was completely changed. The gospels tell of many occasions when Christ restored sight to the blind, quoting Isaiah 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me, to announce good news to the poor, and recovery of sight to the blind.' Jesus often told the Pharisees that they were blind, and this must make us ask ourselves 'in what ways are we 'blind'? We may have our physical eyes open, but are the eyes of our soul open as well, or are there 'scales' preventing us from seeing all that God is trying to tell us? At any point in our lives we only see a limited picture; as Paul himself put it 'Now I see through a glass darkly'; God sees the whole picture. As it was for Ananias, small acts, done in obedience to God, can lead to enormous changes we cannot even glimpse. One way in which Saul certainly had to change his vision was in relation to the gentiles; as a Pharisaic Jew he would have thought that God had little to say to gentiles unless they converted to Judaism. We must pray that any scales that obscure our own vision may fall away so that we may see more clearly what God is asking of us. Saul's blindness also showed him the extent to which – although he had thought of himself as very powerful – he was really rather helpless. We need to acknowledge our own helplessness, and it is only when we do so that we can use God's power to do things of which we would never have imagined ourselves capable. There are many examples of this throughout history; Saul's subsequent life is a prime example.

But Ananias went further: not only did he say to Saul that Jesus had sent him 'that you may recover your sight' but also that he would 'be filled with the holy spirit'. It was through the laying on of hands that Saul was enabled to see again, and also to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This, then, was Saul's 'Pentecost moment', and it clearly had the same energising and empowering effect on him as it did on the apostles. Saul came to Damascus to lay violent hands on the Christians there, but Ananias laid healing hands on Saul. Laying hands on someone is an act of commissioning. At our confirmation the Bishop laid his hands on us, so we have to ask 'what is the task we are commissioned to do'. Ananias received his immediate task in a vision; but 'visions' are rarely that dramatic – all 'vision' means is seeing or understanding what we are asked to do; and that may equally come slowly and quietly.

Finally, Ananias baptized Saul. We have all been baptized, perhaps when very young. Baptism is not just an event, a family get-together for photos. Our baptism says that we are part of Christ's family and, like the laying on of hands, it carries with it an implication of a lifelong mission devoted to his service. In baptism we are literally made part of the body of Christ. It's an amazing thought!

We're not all called to be a Paul – the person spearheading a movement, the person recognized down history for their impact. But I suggest that all of us *are* called to be an Ananias. We must be ready; we must trust – whatever the apparent odds; and we can only do that if we are constantly listening and talking to God. So that when he speaks to us, like Ananias, we can say simply "Here I am, Lord" and prepare to learn what our Lord would have us do in his great service.

Compline Talks 2020, Prof John Morris

Trinity 5; Sunday July 5th; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 3; Collects 2, 4, 5, 7

Last week, we saw how Saul had his sight renewed as Jesus had promised. What is more, Ananias when laying his hand on Saul also said 'receive the Holy Spirit' and baptized Saul. We are not told that this immediately caused any dramatic changes such as speaking in tongues, but only that Saul had something to eat and drink, became stronger after his 3-day fast, and then stayed for some time with the disciples in Damascus. We are also told nothing of the discussions that Saul had with those disciples; whether they, like Ananias, were initially sceptical – but perhaps 'If it's good enough for Ananias it is good enough for me!' was the attitude. I think we can be certain, however, that there would have been a great deal of discussion and sharing of the faith. The story in Acts continues: "Saul stayed some time with the disciples in Damascus. Soon he was proclaiming Jesus publicly in the synagogues 'This' he said 'is the Son of God.' All who heard it were astounded. 'Is not this the man', they said, 'who was in Jerusalem trying to destroy those who invoke this name? Did he not come here for the sole purpose of arresting them and taking them to the chief priests?' But Saul grew more and more forceful and silenced the Jews of Damascus with his cogent proofs that Jesus was the Messiah. As the days mounted up, the Jews hatched a plot against his life; but their plans became known to Saul. They kept watch on the city gates day and night so that they might murder him; but his converts took him one night and let him down by the wall, lowering him in a basket.' When he reached Jerusalem, he tried to join the body of disciples there; but they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe that he was really a convert. Barnabas, however, took him by the hand and introduced him to the apostles. He described to them how Saul had seen the Lord on his journey, and heard his voice, and how he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus at Damascus. Saul now stayed with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem. He spoke out boldly and openly in the name of the Lord, talking and debating with the Greek-speaking Jews. But they planned to murder him, and when the brethren learned of this they escorted him to Caesarea and saw him off to Tarsus." (One can almost sense their sigh of relief!)

There are several things for us to think about in this passage. The first initially seems trivial – in both Damascus and Jerusalem, when Saul first started to expound his new-found faith that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah, he was both feared and doubted. His reputation and actions, particularly having Christians arrested, was well known, so there was every reason to doubt his sincerity and some may have suspected that it was some sort of trick to identify believers. This makes me ask 'Do we judge others on the basis of past behaviour or present actions?' I am thinking particularly about the problems faced by those released from prison and intending to lead a better life – I suspect that as a society we do far too little to help them achieve that desirable goal.

The combination of disbelief and fear, coupled with the fact that Saul was arguing forcefully against some of their doubtless sincerely held religious beliefs, was enough to make the Jews in both Damascus and Jerusalem sufficiently enraged that they tried to kill him. All too often in history people have responded to challenges to their beliefs by violence. Christians have sadly been just as guilty as those of other faiths; you only have to remember the crusades; that Latimer, Ridley, Foxe and Cranmer were all burned at the stake here in Oxford; and the troubles in N Ireland.

Saul's earliest preaching was mainly to Jews, but Jews then as now were not a homogenous group. Realising that I was largely ignorant about the differences, I thought it might be helpful to spend a moment on the different groups. Josephus (a Romanized Jewish writer) mentions four groups in 1st century Judea: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. Then, as now, the groups were often competing and showed little love for one another. You'll remember that Paul himself was a Pharisee. Pharisees were mostly religious laymen. They believed in a Jewish messiah, or 'anointed one' who would bring in an age of justice and peace when all nations would recognise the God of Israel as the only true god and reign from Jerusalem. Indeed, speculation about a messiah was rife at the time – perhaps in part

because of the Roman occupation. Pharisees did believe in life after death, which was one of Paul's deepest convictions. Sadducees, in contrast, were upper class, and saw themselves as elite; they occupied the position of High Priest and many were members of the Sanhedrin. They favoured Hellenization (Greek influence) and denied the resurrection of the dead. Their name apparently derives from Zadok the first High priest of ancient Israel and they held major political and religious roles including maintaining the Temple in Jerusalem. They would doubtless have looked down on someone like Saul and regarded him as a trouble maker. The Essenes were quite different; they espoused poverty, lived mostly in ascetic communities such as Qumran (rather like Christian monastic communities), believed in predestination, and are associated with the dead sea scrolls. They were essentially religious separatists with little involvement in politics. Zealots, in contrast, were more political than religious. Founded by another Galilean, Judas of Galilee (Simon the Zealot was one of Jesus' chosen disciples), they sought to incite the people of Judea to rebel against the Romans and to expel them from the Holy Land by armed insurrection, notably in the first Jewish-Roman war (AD 66-70) which ended with the destruction of the Temple. All these groups were prominent in the years when Saul was active. However, although historians often ignore them, we must not forget the mass of the 'common people' which would have included Jesus and his disciples and most of the early Christian church. After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD 70, the Pharisaic branch came to dominate rabbinic Judaism and apparently had the support of many 'common people' whereas the Sadducees, Essenes and zealots gradually faded away.

Last week we looked at the role of Ananias. This week I'd like us to look briefly at the role of another at first sight minor character Barnabas, who was a prominent early Christian disciple in Jerusalem. Acts tells us that he was a Cypriot Jew who had sold some land and given the proceeds to the early Christian community. It was Barnabus who took Saul by the hand and explained to the Jerusalem Christians the background to Saul's change of heart. It has also been suggested that he and Saul had been students together when Saul was studying with Gamaliel. Whether or not that is true, despite the fact that Barnabus had not witnessed the events in Damascus, he clearly believed that Saul's conversion was genuine. Indeed, he believed it sufficiently strongly that, when the early church sent him to preach the gospel in Antioch and he found the work overwhelming, he went off to Tarsus to find Saul (who he called an 'admirable colleague'). The two of them then worked together in Antioch for a year before returning to Jerusalem. Later, with John Mark, Barnabus and Saul returned to spread the gospel first in Antioch, then in Cyprus and in cities in what is now southern Turkey.

So, while Saul had a good friend in Barnabas, he had many detractors and, in the early days of the church, was much less respected than Peter and James. Indeed, Peter and Saul never really resolved their differences: Peter and the Jerusalem church continued to insist that, in order to join the Christian movement, Gentiles must accept the rules of Judaism and be circumcised; Saul, however, argued strongly that circumcision was not an issue and believed that his vision of Jesus on the Damascus road mandated him to spread the gospel. At their second meeting in Jerusalem Peter and Saul seem to have agreed to disagree: whereas Peter, James and John would spread the gospel among the Jews, Saul would do the same among gentiles where he was better known as Paul. It is Paul's literacy and letters that have ensured his place in Christian history. In contrast to Paul's 13 letters (at least 7 of which are thought to be by Paul himself), we have just two letters attributed to Peter and one each to James and Jude (though for all these the actual author is in doubt).

Preparing this reflection has not only educated me about the different 1st century Jewish sects and the split in the early Christian movement, but also made me pause and think about the extent to which the church today has become divided by our different traditions. Some of it is, of course, a matter of taste and culture, but I think that, for the sake of the essential message of the gospel, we should all work harder on the important things that unite us, rather than insisting on what are often the largely irrelevant trivia that divide us.

Compline Talks 2020 Prof John Morris

Trinity 6; Sunday July 12th; Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 1 ; Collects 1, 3, 5, 6

Having concentrated on Saul for the past few weeks and, last Sunday, ended up with him escaping to Tarsus for a year or so to escape threats to his life in Jerusalem, we will continue the story in Acts. You may remember my suggestion that, when Saul escaped to Tarsus, Peter might have expressed some relief. It may be relevant that Acts continues “Meanwhile the church ... was left *in peace* to build up its strength. Upheld by the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers.” The next section (Acts 9: 32-43) focuses on two very powerful healings.

“Peter was making a general tour, during which he went to visit God’s people at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas who had been bed-ridden with paralysis for 8 years. Peter said to him ‘Jesus Christ cures you; get up and make your bed’, and immediately he stood up. All who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him; and they turned to the Lord. In Joppa there was a disciple called Tabitha (in Greek ‘Dorcas’ meaning gazelle, or beautiful eyes) who filled her days with acts of kindness and charity. She fell ill and died; and they washed her body and laid it in an upstairs room. As Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples sent two men to Peter asking him ‘Please come to us without delay’. Peter went and when he arrived they took him upstairs to the room, where all the women came and stood around him in tears, showing him the clothes that Dorcas used to make when she was with them. Peter sent them all outside and knelt down and prayed. Then, turning to the body he said ‘Get up Tabitha’. She opened her eyes, saw Peter and sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the members of the congregation and the widows and showed her to them alive. The news spread all over Joppa, and many came to believe in the Lord. Peter stayed on in Joppa for some time with Simon, a tanner.”

Two bits of background may interest you. Lydda (modern Lod; the location of Ben Gurion airport) was an ancient city about 21 miles NW of Jerusalem in the district of Sharon, and 9 miles from Joppa on road between Joppa and Jerusalem. While mainly Jewish, it developed an important early Christian community, possibly as a result of the apostle Philip preaching there. The Bishop of Lydda was a member of the Council of Nicea in 325. Biblical Joppa (modern Jaffa) was and still is a very important port city then under Jewish and Roman control. It was the main port of Judea (where Jonah took ship to flee from the Lord). The end of our bible passage notes that, after the healing, Peter stayed with Simon the Tanner while preaching in the area. Not, you might think, very noteworthy. However, Jews like Peter regarded leather tanning as an ‘unclean occupation’; tanners had to live 50 cubits outside town because of the smell and lived near the sea for water to wash hides. For a girl, learning that her fiancé was a tanner was sufficient legal justification for breaking off the engagement! This reminds me that we all have certain prejudices, but if God is going to use us to live the gospel we, like Peter, must try to put all prejudices aside, and seek in prayer to discover what unacknowledged prejudices we have so that they don’t hinder the work.

Because of my medical background I’ve been very interested in all the biblical accounts of healing. This isn’t the first report of healing by Peter. In Acts 3, when confronted with a man lame from birth (it sounds like a severe form of club foot), Peter says ‘In the name of Jesus Christ. rise up and walk’. Aeneas (who may or may not have been a Christian) was paralysed; it could have been some sort of psychogenic paralysis, though the 8 years makes that unlikely. Here, again Peter says the same thing ‘Jesus Christ heals you, get up and make your bed’. Here, the comparison with Jesus’s healing of the paralysed man whose friends had to make a hole in the roof to lower him and his bed down in front of Jesus (Luke 5) is important. Jesus also said ‘Stand up, take up your bed, and walk’ (the phrase ‘take/make up your bed’ sounds odd, but apparently the Greek means ‘do things for yourself’), But note: whereas Jesus just gave the command, Peter says ‘Jesus Christ heals you’ and then the command. Peter didn’t say “In the name of Jesus Christ, I heal you” but “Jesus Christ heals you.” Peter attributes the healing power to Jesus, not to himself.

Tabitha, was certainly a member of the Lydda Christian community, and clearly a person of some standing because she is the only person for which the Greek term 'female disciple' is used. We must thank God that women now play a very central role in our church life and, in passing, I take this opportunity to welcome Susy, our new curate, and to ask God's blessing on her ministry among us. Unlike Aeneas, Tabitha was not paralysed but dead; her body had actually been washed and laid out by people who would certainly have noted any signs of life. By custom, the dead were buried before sundown, so Peter had to hurry the nine miles from Lydda to Joppa on foot. Arriving at the house, Peter prays then tells Tabitha to 'get up'. Here we have direct parallels with Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5, Luke 11); the clearing of the room; the command 'Get up'; the taking by the hand; the showing to friends. Even the Aramaic words have an interesting similarity: 'Talitha, kum' - 'little girl, get up' for Jairus' daughter, and 'Tabitha, kum' - 'Tabitha, get up' for the resurrection in Joppa.

The short passage we've considered has two reports of miraculous healing by the power of God and we're told that, as a result of these miracles entire towns turned to Christ, though how long that conversion remained we cannot know. As Steve Cole puts it 'Unless a person develops a consistent walk in the Holy Spirit, no experience, however, dramatic, will result in lasting change'. I don't know whether you, like me, worry about an emphasis on 'miracles.' One definition of a 'miracle' would be something that cannot be explained by the knowledge of the time. Many things in our modern life would have appeared 'miraculous' in the first century, and an emphasis on miraculous healing leaves us with the problem of the many who are not healed/brought back from death despite fervent prayer. We should, perhaps, view the miracles as signs; signs that God can always give spiritual healing and new life to those who were somehow spiritually sick or dead. What, then is the relevance of the fact that, in the healing of both Aeneas and Tabitha, concerned Christian friends were part of the story. Peter could not have known about Aeneas lying paralysed at home unless he had been told by someone, and two of Tabitha's friends hurried the 9 miles from Joppa to Lydda to find Peter. In all the healings we have considered, friends with a strong faith have either directed or brought people they are concerned about to Christ or to Peter. Nowadays, we leave the physical aspects medical treatment to doctors and hospitals. We have come to expect healing, and medical staff heal many thousands daily. We've almost stopped thinking about it as a miracle. A nasty brush with a serious illness may make some think more about the deeper things of life but I guess that most people thank the hospital rather than God. However, our life and the ability of doctors to use their skills and training are God-given. So, in that sense, all healing originates from God.

So, what part are we called to play? We do well to remember that the speed with which people are healed and recover is very much influenced by their state of mind and their approach to the illness or disease. There is very good evidence that those who take a very positive attitude to their illness recover more quickly than those who simply bemoan their bad luck. So, friends and the attitude of friends can and do have a real impact on the healing process. Each week in church and in our private prayers, we pray for those who are sick or in other forms of distress, but we shouldn't just leave it there - and think 'job done'. We need to ask in our prayers 'How may Christ be wanting to use me as part of a healing?' An emphasis on God's power to heal doesn't mean we don't need to play our part; but our trust must be in God and not in our own power or training. Too often we view such problems from a very human perspective, and shy away from difficult tasks, rather than trusting in the power of God in Christ and the Holy Spirit to work through us. Someone put it this way 'The first condition of work for the Lord is - hide yourself behind your message, and make it clear that His is the power and that you are just a tool.'

Aeneas and Tabitha were healed and restored by God in a wonderful way through Peter and through the actions of concerned friends. We must pray to remain alert to the needs of all those around us, so that Christ can use us in His work of healing and restoration in our world today.

Compline 2020. Prof John Morris

Trinity 7; Sunday July 19th; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 1,2,3 ; Collects 2,4,6,7

When we left Peter last week, he was staying in Joppa with Simon the Tanner, and we noted that Tanners were regarded as 'unclean' by Jews. This week we see Peter being led by God to break another Jewish taboo – eating with Gentiles – overturning what Peter would see as an important part of 'the law'. It's a long section (Acts 10:1-48) with a lot of repetition, so I hope you'll forgive me for abridging it.

"Cornelius, a Roman centurion stationed in Caesarea, was a devout man who prayed constantly to God and gave generous alms to the poor. One afternoon he had a vision in which an angel told him that God had noted his piety and alms and had told him to send men to Joppa to find Peter who was lodging with Simon, a tanner. Cornelius immediately sent two slaves and a devout soldier to Joppa. The next day Peter was praying and became hungry. He too had a vision in which, three times, he saw a linen container being lowered from heaven containing various animals which the Jewish religion forbade him to eat, and a voice telling him to kill and eat. When he demurred, saying that he had never eaten anything against the law, the voice told him 'What God has made clean you must not call profane'. At this point the men sent by Cornelius arrived and Peter, still puzzling about his vision, heard the voice telling him 'Get up, and go with men who are looking for you, for I have sent them'. Peter therefore gave them lodging and, the next day, went with them to Caesarea where he met Cornelius, his family and close friends. Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and worshipped him but Peter made him get up, went into the house with him and said, 'You must know that it is unlawful for a Jew to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean. Why did you send for me?' Cornelius then told Peter about his own vision and said 'We are all here to listen to what the Lord has commanded you to say'. Peter then said 'I now know that God is not partial, and that anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know that Jesus was sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace, beginning in Galilee, that God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power, and that he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by evil. They put him to death by crucifying him; but God raised him on the third day and he appeared to those of us who God chose as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead and that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.' While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles, who they heard speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said 'Can anyone withhold baptism from these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So, he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, after which they invited him to stay for several days." In terms of world history this was a key event. It is the start of the spreading of the Gospel to the Gentiles. It's idle speculation but, had it not occurred, who can tell what our religious beliefs would be today.

Peter and Cornelius are, at first sight, utterly different. Peter was a fisherman from Galilee, a region very antagonistic to the Romans. He was impetuous, but also a leader. He was a Jew, steeped in Jewish custom and Temple worship, who had spent three years with Jesus. He may have recalled Jesus saying to a Canaanite woman that he was sent 'only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel', but also Jesus' last earthly, post-resurrection command to the disciples to 'Teach all nations, baptizing them' and to 'Feed my sheep'. He may also have been wrestling with the question of whether the gospel was meant for the gentiles after his earlier meeting with Paul in Jerusalem.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion in 'the Italian cohort'; part of the occupying power; a gentile, and therefore doubly problematic for a God-fearing Jew like Peter. Centurions apparently rose from the

ranks and were selected on merit (the senior officers were chosen from important Roman families). Cornelius was apparently a devout man who feared God with all his household; and gave alms generously, probably to the Temple. He was clearly attracted by, and prayed to the God of the Jews (there are other examples; another centurion built the synagogue in Capernaum). It is probably no coincidence that Cornelius' vision occurs at the time of afternoon prayer in the Temple. What the story of Cornelius shows us is that, whatever our background and past, whenever God sees in us a desire and hunger for Him, He will come to meet us. As Jesus said 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; they *shall* be filled'. And we should note that Cornelius didn't keep it to himself – he involved his family and his friends.

Cornelius and Peter both had visions that contained instructions. Although we are told that Cornelius was frightened by the angel, his vision was reassuring rather than threatening. He was told that God had noted his prayers and goodness; and was told to send for Peter. It was no problem for a Roman centurion to have dealings with Jews; it was part of the day job. Having been brought up with the Roman Pantheon, thinking seriously about the one God of a conquered people must have been a big step, but Cornelius certainly talks of 'God', not 'the Gods'.

Peter was told to do something far more difficult. He was praying and getting hungry when he fell asleep, so perhaps it is no surprise that his vision was of food. The fact that it was repeated three times would have reminded Peter of his three-fold denials and of Jesus' three-fold command to 'feed my sheep'. Most of the food in the vision was forbidden to a Jew, so Peter's horrified response was entirely predictable. His vision effectively required him to ignore the commands of the Torah and the deeply-held Jewish tradition that even entering the house of a Gentile, let alone eating with them, was unclean and forbidden by God. It was not just the food, but also the utensils – I was once invited out for a meal when I was in Jerusalem, and had to be given a separate set of cutlery and plates kept specially for gentiles. Peter was called upon fundamentally to reinterpret his own understanding of both scripture and tradition in order to follow the path that God asked of him.

The coming of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household was a clear proof for Peter that God had sanctioned his actions, and overturned the belief of the early church that only faithful Jews could receive the Holy Spirit. It led to baptism of Cornelius' household and to Peter's decision (along with his fellow Jewish believers) to stay with Cornelius for some days. Whatever their previous differences, both groups saw that God had made them one in Christ in a new way. To achieve this end, both Peter and Cornelius had to obey their God-inspired visions. God was apparently preparing Peter to welcome Gentiles into the community of Christian believers. Peter, with James was the acknowledged leader of the Christian community, but leaders then as now weren't beyond being questioned. A little later in Acts we see the Jerusalem believers questioning Peter's decision to visit and eat with uncircumcised people. They basically asked 'How can the church be a church of Scripture, honouring the word of God from long ago, and yet be in mission among Gentiles without insisting on keeping the law as Scripture presents it?'

The Jewish beliefs that Peter held were based on 2000+ years of OT history and scriptures constantly added to and interpreted. Our Christian faith today is also very much based on scriptures first written down almost 2000 years ago. Peter's vision taught him that it was the core substance, and not the letter of the law that was important. I believe we should ask ourselves to what extent we have let two millennia of human culture, interpretation of scriptures and church customs colour our own vision of the fundamental messages of the gospel. If we, in our day are to follow Jesus' command to 'feed my sheep', then maybe we, like Saul, need some 'scales' to fall from our eyes so that we can see more clearly. We must pray that God will guide our vision so that we may understand for fully the roles that He would wish each and every one of us to play in our lives.

