

Acts 9:1-6

John 21:1-19

If you want to know about Peter, and the beach and all that - I preached on it the last 3 years, so go look them up on the website. Today I want to talk about Paul - or Saul, if you prefer.

Like others in the bible he has 2 names - Jesus, called the Christ, Simon, called Peter, and Saul, also called Paul. People sometimes say that he changed his name when he got converted, but actually if you look through Acts, he still uses Saul, when he's Jewish areas, but Roman's can't pronounce S's, or to make himself more gentile friendly, he also calls himself Paul.

Paul - St Paul - is important to Christianity. Some have said Paul founded Christianity - without him it might not have spread to the gentiles, to the roman empire, and then to the rest of the world. He wrote the majority of the new testament - 14 of the 27 books, as well as being a star of the book of Acts. His is the first recorded account of the Lord's supper.

Here's a book on Jesus and the gospels, and here's one on Paul!

So we're not going to have time to do all of Paul today!

Paul is born in Tarsus, north of Israel, to a Jewish family from the tribe of Benjamin, and also inherits Roman citizenship. So from birth he inhabits 2 worlds, 2 languages, and bridges them. He studies the Torah and Judaism under Gamaliel - one of the leading rabbi's of the day.

He hates the Christian movement for at least 4 reasons

1 - it threatens Judaism

Its popular, grass roots, more people might follow. And Jesus seems to have been a law breaker and no friend of the temple or the pharisees

2 - it will bring the Jews into more persecution from Rome

Because Jesus was a trouble maker, a rebel leader, the Romans will crack down more.

More importantly are the last 2 reasons

3 - it is simply wrong, heresy, leading people astray

A man cannot be God, a man cannot forgive sins. Jesus is not the Messiah

And lastly - Paul loves the law and righteousness - which is to say, keeping clean - and Jesus, although he says he does not abolish not one jot or tittle of the law but fulfils it - Jesus does say - its not the rules that keep you ok with God. And anyone who speaks ill of the law, is no friend of Paul.

So Paul sets about persecuting the “followers of the way” - the way of Jesus.

So what do I mean by persecuting - name calling? Teasing?

No - arrest, imprisonment, death by stoning.

Peter and other apostles were arrested, but released by angels.

When Stephen - a man full of the holy spirit and grace, the first deacon and the first martyr - was stoned to death for blasphemy - Saul / Paul was there approving of his death.

And so the early church is scattered - they flee Jerusalem, taking the good news of Jesus with them. Philip and Peter go to Samaria, others go elsewhere. And Saul starts going house to house imprisoning people. And when he's done there, he looks wider afield - and decides to head for Damascus - with letters for the synagogue leaders.

And then this happens - a blinding light, falling to the ground, a noise that some think is thunder, others hear a voice, and he is left blind, helpless and now his nemesis has become his Lord.

And the rest of Paul's life is spent telling people about Jesus, trying to persuade them to follow him. He goes to Jerusalem and talks to the disciples, he goes on these immense missionary journeys all round the Mediterranean, into Turkey, and its through his letters that we hear about so many of these early christian communities. Everywhere, nearly, he goes, he is not received well - he has stones thrown at him, he is arrested, beaten by soldiers, causes riots, has to escape in a basket over a city wall. He does not have an easy life. He is finally arrested and appeals to go to Rome to have his case heard by Caesar. While going there he is in a shipwreck and brings Christianity to Crete! Finally in Rome he's in prison for several years before finally being put to death, probably beheaded under Nero in AD 65.

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So before I went to college, vicar factory, I would have said that at his conversion Saul became Paul.

A Jew became a Christian

And that all of Judaism with its laws and rules was wrong

And Christianity with its freedom and forgiveness was right.

But at college we learnt about “new perspectives” on Paul.

Obviously if you've got no prior knowledge its all a new perspective!s

But their point was - Its the same God Paul believed in before and after, he just now has a bigger picture of them. Paul continues to be a Jew and in fact keeps many of their rules and observances: going to the temple and fasting etc.

And this makes a massive difference.

For centuries, Christians have persecuted Jews - they were the ones crucified Jesus, they were to blame. All the anti-Semitism has come from Christianity and come from this conversion of Paul, misunderstood.

If we realise that Paul does not reject his Judaism, that Jesus is in fact, a Jew! Then suddenly the old testament is worth reading, Judaism is worth studying and exploring - its not just the background, its the whole story that Jesus and Paul were trying to say. Christianity is not a different religion, its really Judaism v.2 - where we see the Trinity, where the sacrifice and atonement system is reworked.

And here's the thing - Paul's turn around, Paul's epiphany - was life changing, world changing, humbling, shattering. He is physically blinded, psychologically scarred by having his firmest convictions and beliefs not just changed or cast aside, but actually reversed. He wanted to wipe Jesus name out, and then he discovers that Jesus is the answer he's been looking for his whole life.

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You might take a lot away from this today, or you might not - you might forgotten by lunchtime!

But here's 2 possible thoughts -

People are praying about Ukraine and I've heard said - there's nothing to be done about Putin. But Paul's conversion shows us, that anyone, anyone - can have their hearts changed by God. Its just as likely that angels will stop tanks and soldiers put up their guns, as Putin will have a disturbing dream and wake up a changed person. Its happened before. So don't give up hope and lets pray for Putin.

And - when have you been proved wrong? When did you need to change your mind about something? Was it women priests, or gay people? Or Sunday shopping? Was it Brexit or Boris, or someone you know you judged wrongly? We cannot know everything - so we are going to be wrong about things. All the great thinkers - St Augustine, Einstein, Newton, Pascal - they all change their minds about key things.

(And if you haven't had to change your mind - why is that?)

So we must be open to being wrong about stuff. To the idea that there is more to know and see. Paul's idea of God changed overnight went from a narrow, inward looking, hate-filled one dimension - to a worldwide, world changing trinitarian God of every more possibilities.

Don't make your God too small, be prepared to change your mind.