



## The Adventure of Faith: Seeing the Light - Saul's Conversion - Acts 9:1-19 T.Yacomeni Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2018

*9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'<sup>5</sup> 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied.<sup>6</sup> 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'<sup>7</sup> The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

Have you ever been on the motorway and realised you were going in entirely the wrong direction? When she was a student, Mims was travelling to Cheltenham and the journey seemed to be taking rather a long time. It was only when she saw signs for Reading that she realised something was wrong. Somehow she had taken a wrong turn onto the M4 instead of the M5.

Or have you ever realised that someone you thought was a nightmare turns out to be completely different than you imagined? Cathy was telling us on Thursday how her childhood enemy whom she hated at school has ended up being a lifelong best buddy. When she actually got to know her she was completely different to the way she imagined. All it took was actually spending time with her in order to see her in a totally different light.

Well as we heard in our bible reading today from Acts, when Saul of Tarsus 'saw the light', he experienced such fundamental brain reversal that he couldn't see or communicate for several days afterwards. Psychologists would suggest that the experience was so intense and traumatic that his autonomic nervous system went into what's called immobility or dissociation mode and he froze to protect his brain from meltdown.

But if you think about it this was not just a trivial change of mind. This was a world-changing event. In this one moment, Saul was transformed from a violent, scheming terrorist zealot to a compassionate servant and exponent of Christ. His whole mindset, ideology and way of life were turned completely upside down, and his renewed thinking went on to change the world as he unlocked the mysteries of salvation through faith in Jesus to the early church.

Although Saul's experience is referred to as the original 'Road to Damascus conversion' it wasn't simply a change of opinion as you might hear people describe when they use the phrase today. Saul hadn't been thinking for a while that his passion and zeal for the strict rules and dogma of Jewish tradition were misplaced. On the contrary he was keen to prove his zeal for the Jewish nation by rounding up and imprisoning these dodgy Christian heretics who were undermining the law of Moses. He had grown up in

strict Jewish orthodoxy. He had studied the Torah under an influential Rabbi called Gamaliel. He was part of the fundamentalist sect of the Pharisees. If Saul were a modern day Muslim, he would be the equivalent of an ISIS jihadist.

Yet God chose to meet Saul on the road to Damascus and call him to a completely new life and an adventure of faith as the missionary known as the Apostle Paul. And God is still calling and radically transforming people today.

This is a picture of Bashir Mohammad (or at least his back) taken in Turkey in March last year for an article in the New York Times entitled ‘The Jihadi Who Turned to Jesus’



25 year old Bashir Mohammad fought on the front lines of the Syrian civil war for Jabhat al-Nusra, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, less than four years ago. But he said “after I saw Muslims killing Muslims, I realized there was something wrong.”

The next year, he and his wife fled the war entirely, leaving for Istanbul and joining around 2.5 million other Syrians in exile in Turkey. Still a zealous Muslim, Mr. Mohammad prayed so loudly that his upstairs neighbours complained. “They used to ask me, ‘When are you going to turn into a prophet?’” He still required Ms. Rashid to cover her hair and neck, and planned for her to wear a niqab, or full-face covering. But it was Ms. Rashid herself who unwittingly prompted her husband’s rejection of Islamism. In early 2015, she fell seriously ill. As her health worsened, Mr. Mohammad described her condition in a phone call with his cousin Ahmad — the same cousin who had taken him to jihadist lectures as a teenager. Ahmad was now living in Canada and, in a move that shocked Mr. Mohammad, had converted to Christianity. An enthusiastic convert, Ahmad asked Mr. Mohammad to place his telephone close to Ms. Rashid, so that his prayer group could sing and pray for her health. Horrified, Mr. Mohammad initially refused, since he had been taught to find Christianity repellent. But he was also desperate, and eventually he gave in. When Ms. Rashid improved within a few days, Mr. Mohammad ascribed it to his cousin’s intervention. Intrigued, he then began to entertain a sacrilegious thought. He asked his cousin to recommend a Christian preacher in Istanbul who might introduce him to the religion.

For Mr. Mohammad and Ms. Rashid, perhaps it was their dreams that sealed their conversion. As the couple began to consider leaving Islam, Ms. Rashid said she dreamed of a biblical figure who used heavenly powers to divide the waters of the sea, which Mr. Mohammad interpreted as a sign of

encouragement from Jesus. Then, Mr. Mohammad himself dreamed Jesus had given him some food to sustain him. The pair felt loved. "There's a big gap between the god I used to worship and the one I worship now," Mr. Mohammad said. "We used to worship in fear. Now everything has changed."

For Mr. Mohammad, all this has nevertheless come at a high price. His rejection of Islam makes him a target for his fundamentalist former allies and he fears they will one day catch up with him. If they do, however, he reckons he now has the greatest protection of all. "I trust," he says, "in God."

Jesus is in the business of transforming lives, and all it takes is one genuine encounter with him to totally reverse our preconceived ideas and send us out with fire in our hearts and a mission in our minds.

The thing that Bashir Mohammad and Saul of Tarsus have in common is that they were both God seekers. They both prayed fervently. They wanted to see the Kingdom of God established. It's just that they were looking in the wrong places for it.

So how much are you seeking God today? Are you praying for an encounter with him. Are you joining other God seekers saying 'Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?' Are you watching and waiting for God to move in your life? Well the good news is that God's promise to you today is 'Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.'

The Apostle Paul's adventure of faith started as he was travelling on a Journey. He was already doing his utmost to live out his faith, albeit focussed wrongly on dogma and ideology. But as the saying goes, it is only possible to steer a moving ship. If you simply sit on your hands refusing to have anything to do with God until he comes to you, I suspect you may be waiting a very long time. So we need to be not only God seekers, but also active participants. If God seems silent right now, keep going, because at some point on the journey you will encounter him and receive a whole new set of instructions.

For Saul of Tarsus, it was as he travelled to Damascus in Syria that the Lord met him. Only yesterday British fighters joined with French and American forces to bomb targets in the same city. We need to remain watchful and alert to what is going on spiritually when world powers start gathering for war over such ancient territories. Jesus told us not to be alarmed when we hear about wars and rumours of wars, or famines and earthquakes in various places, but in due time the end will come and we need to be ready to meet him when he returns to bring justice to the earth.

How do we get ready? By walking the way of Jesus, instead of our own way. Verse 2 tells us that one of the most ancient names for Christianity was 'The Way'. That is why our strapline as a Church is 'following the Way of Jesus, serving the community.' The URC church have just introduced a whole new set of resources about daily Christian discipleship called 'walking in the way.'

The way of Jesus is to take the narrow path, when everyone else may be taking the easier wider road.



Following the way of Jesus means trusting him to lead us, despite not always knowing the final destination. Saul had to be led by the hand to Damascus, and pretty soon his companions would have realised that he was now aligning himself with the very people they were going to arrest.

Following the way of Jesus means valuing the word of God over the numerous other voices clamouring for our attention in the world.

Following the way of Jesus means realising we might be wrong about the way we've been thinking. Being ready to love our enemies instead of hating them.

Following the way of Jesus means acknowledging that Jesus is Lord. He's not just a political or historical figure to be criticised, he is alive, he has a plan, he is gracious and forgiving, and he wants us to know him. If we will only ask 'Who are you, Lord?' we are giving him permission to reveal his character and his call upon our lives. Jesus himself said 'I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Saul's adventure of faith started with a journey, and over these next weeks and months we are going to travel with him, understanding that God is calling us to go further on our own adventure of faith. It all starts with that question 'who are you Lord?'