

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 1 May 2022 – ‘Saul and Ananias’ - by Revd David Cuckson

Opening Sentences (*Psalm 30:4-5*)

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

HYMN Singing the Faith 81 (*Martin Rinkart*)

1. Now thank we all our God,
with hearts and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

2. O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
in this world and the next.

3. All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son, and him who reigns
with them in highest heaven,
the one eternal God,
whom earth and heaven adore,
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Prayer

As we praise God, so too we recognise that we have fallen short of the life that we ought to live. We confess the sins that no one knows and the sins that everyone knows; the sins that are a burden to us and the sins that do not bother us because we have got used to them. We confess our sins as a church. We have not loved one another as Christ loved us. We have not forgiven one another as we have been forgiven. We have not given ourselves in love and service for the world as Christ gave himself for us.

Father, forgive us. Send the Holy Spirit to us, that he may give us power to live as, by your mercy, you have called us to live. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

As we consider words of Scripture, we pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give us wisdom and vision which leads to the knowledge of him. **Amen.**

Acts 9:1-20 (NRSVA)

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'

Reflection

It is a remarkable story, one that has been vividly brought to life for us by many great artists. Perhaps for that very reason we are inclined to focus on the image of that event on the Damascus road and its immediate impact on Saul, soon to be renamed as Paul, as well as those folk who were with him and were witnesses, though without comprehending. But there is another important person in the story, namely Ananias, and here I want to look at the contrast between these two principal characters and the way in which they interacted with one another.

We think of Paul now as one of the greatest early Christian missionaries, as well as the pre-eminent Christian theologian of the New Testament. But even as Saul, before his conversion experience, he was an outstanding member of the Jewish community. Born in Tarsus, to the north of Israel, he was a Roman citizen – not unknown for a Jew but unusual enough to be worthy of comment. But he was brought up in the Jewish religious tradition, and in fact had probably a better formal education than any of the other early Christians. He was brought up a Pharisee, one of the religious elite, and he studied for a time in Jerusalem under the famous Rabbi, Gamaliel. It is clear from his writings that he had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and was brought up to know, follow and fear the Mosaic Law.

We are not told his reasons for persecuting those who had become followers of Jesus, Perhaps he was simply wanting to impress the high priest and to be counted as one of the leaders within the Jewish hierarchy, or he may have been so strongly attached to his interpretation of the Mosaic Law that the teaching of Jesus threatened the whole basis on which he had built his life to date. But to

the Christians in Damascus his coming was seen as a real threat – here was a ‘big beast’ about to threaten the very foundations of their little community, a person who would strike fear into the heart of their whole membership.

And so we come to Ananias. According to Luke in chapter 22 of the Book of Acts, Paul described Ananias as ‘a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there’. But that is all we know about him. He does not appear to have any particular standing within the Christian community in Damascus – not a leader but rather a ‘worthy’ church member, not radical or outspoken but someone who could be ‘relied on’. It was no wonder that he was reluctant to approach Saul. ‘I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.’ He is really arguing, ‘I am not the person to stand up to Saul and deal with him. If trouble comes to me, I hope that I can deal with it, but I do not want, or feel able, to go out looking for trouble.’

What a contrast there is between these two individuals – the almost ‘larger than life’ character of Saul, the future leader in the Church, and Ananias, the humble though faithful church member, a committed follower of Christ albeit somewhat reluctant to offer his services. And yet it becomes clear that both play an essential part in the ongoing mission of the Christian Church.

Today’s reading from Acts ends with recounting how for several days Saul spent time with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately, we are told, he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ And so Saul goes on to become the Paul who is famous for his missionary travels around much of the Roman empire, ending up in the capital city of Rome itself, also remarkable for his letters to various Christian communities, which reflect both his pastoral concerns and also his theological expositions which continue to be of such importance to all followers of, and seekers after, the way of Christ. But all this is dependant on the intervention of Ananias in calling on him in Damascus, now addressing him as ‘Brother Saul’ and healing his sight. Without Ananias coming in his hour of greatest need Paul might never have become the leading figure in the infant Christian Church that he in fact did.

In this account of the conversion of Saul we see how the Church depends on all of its members to play their part in its life and witness. Some go on to achieve a national, even an international, reputation, and we give to them proper appreciation and respect. But the contribution of the individual in the pew is equally important and can be no less significant when you look at the life of the Church overall. Ananias is mentioned for only one thing in the New Testament scriptures, but what a role he played. So too each of us may find an opportunity facing us, a challenge, a call, that we may be reluctant to take on, for which we feel ourselves to be ill equipped and unworthy, but in which we may find that we can make our own response to Christ which is significant in his sight.

HYMN Singing the Faith 513 (*John L Bell and Graham Maule*)

1, Take this moment, sign and space;
take my friends around;
here among us make the place
where your love is found.

4. Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ’s own mould.

2. Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.

5. Take my talents, take my skills,
take what's yet to be;
let my life be yours, and yet,
let it still be me.

3. Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,
letting your forgiveness touch
all I can't forget.

Prayers

Lord God, the story of your love for us makes us realize that there are many others as well as ourselves who need our help and your grace.

So we bring our prayers to you:

for those who suffer pain;

for those whose minds are disturbed, or have never matured;

for those who have not had the opportunity to realize their potentialities;

for those who are satisfied with something less than the life that was open to them;

for those who know their guilt, their shallowness, their need, but who do not know of Jesus;

for those who know that they must shortly die;

for those who cannot wait to die.

Lord God, your Son has taken all our sufferings upon himself and has transformed them. Help us, who offer these prayers, to take the sufferings of others upon ourselves, and so by your grace, become the agents of your transforming love. **Amen.**

The Blessing

May the God of peace, who brought from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make us perfect in all goodness so that we may do his will, and may he make of us what he would have us be through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever.

Amen.

[Prayers taken and adapted from Contemporary Prayers for Public Worship published by SCM]