

Sermon Given by

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Acts 9:10-19 - "The hand of welcome"

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What difference does it really make to be a Christian? That is a question I am sometimes asked by people trying to get their heads round what it might look like for them to be Christians.

It's actually quite tricky to answer because it isn't adequate to take a list of things which Christians do and think that simply by doing them I am a Christian as well.

There was an experiment we used to do, making crystals using a saturated solution – for example of copper sulphate and the thing would grow fairly fast and look pretty good. But you could very quickly shrink it down to nothing, just by putting into a dilute solution. All the growth disappeared quite quickly when you did that.

And sometimes where people have been in close contact with Christians they may look the part for while; but take them out of that environment and what was merely external growth – doing Christian things – quickly dissolves away.

In the case of the crystals it was I think a physical change – in other words a change of state, which was reversible.

That is very different from a chemical change where two or more substances are combined and something entirely new is brought into being.

The apostle Paul understood the difference between the two phenomena. If anyone is in Christ, he says, it is a new creation. It's not just a matter of doing a few Christian things, but underneath basically you're the same person. From the heart, a person is utterly transformed, from the inside out. And he knew that to be true, because it was an experience he had actually lived.

We began thinking about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus last week. Just to recap: we thought about the person he was – a mind poisoned with prejudice and a heart full of hatred against the Lord's disciples.

And we thought about the person he met: Jesus had called out to him: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? So what happened was a personal encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus and a personal surrender to him Jesus.

In the next few verses I want us to think about the person he became. And we'll focus on three new relationships.

### **1. He had a new relationship with God.**

I'll read verses 10-12. <sup>10</sup>*In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"*

*"Yes, Lord," he answered.*

<sup>11</sup>*The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup>In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

A new relationship with God... Do you see it there, at the end of verse 11? What is the clue to Ananias that the man he's been told to visit is a changed man? 'He is praying.'

Three days had passed since he met the living Lord Jesus on the road and he apparently hadn't eaten during that time – a mark of how absorbed he was in his new found relationship. He had fasted before no doubt – but this was different.

And he had said his prayers before – he was a Pharisee. But this wasn't just saying his prayers. He was praying now. He was actually getting through.

Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, he will have gone up to the temple to pray and like him he could probably have claimed I fast twice a week. But now through Jesus and his cross, Saul had been reconciled to God and as a result he had immediate access to the Father and the Holy Spirit was witnessing with his spirit that he was the Father's child.

So the chapter starts with him breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. Now he is breathing out prayer and praise to God - and it was as natural as breathing – because he had a new relationship with Almighty God.

May I ask if this has its parallel in your experience? Or do your prayers rise no higher than the ceiling – before they fall back to earth like a bird with clipped wings.

That would be a sign, possibly, that you aren't yet converted. Because to pray will always be evidence of a new relationship with God, as the Spirit enables us to cry out to God: 'Abba Father'.

Let's move on and consider **Saul's new relationship to the world.**

## **2. Saul's new relationship with the world.**

You will remember that Ananias at first takes some convincing in verses 13-4  
***<sup>13</sup>"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."***

But look what God says in verse 15-6: ***<sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup>I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."***

Saul has a new relationship with the world... Because true conversion always puts us into uniform. The man who had gone to Damascus with a commission from the High Priests, returns with a higher commission: from the King of Kings himself, to take the news of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

We've often mentioned in this series that Acts 1 verse 8 is a promise which makes sense of the whole book.

***'You will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes on you', says Jesus, 'and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth'.***

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a vital part of that promise being fulfilled, because he received a special commission as Apostle to the Gentiles: to carry Christ's name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel – complete with the suffering that would inevitably be involved in that.

Now we are not apostles to the Gentiles as he was; but if God has gone to these lengths to call the apostle obviously derivatively there is a commission to us today. We don't need a special commission to be a messenger of God to other people.

There's a story about a well-intentioned super-spiritual girl who told her church leader that she was called to be a missionary to Brazil and the minister wanted to probe that just a little. So he asked her how the guidance had come. 'Well,' she explained, 'I was walking along the street and I saw a greengrocers and on the Christmas display shelf was a tray full of Brazil nuts.'

The minister nodded and gently asked her what she would have done if she had seen a shelf full of Mars bars.

We often imagine that unless God spells it out with some dramatic communication we are not involved in the evangelisation of the world. But we are. Paul was converted and commissioned on the same day. If you are a converted Christian, you are to be involved in this work as well.

That means that everyone here – everyone in Little Shelford – everyone in the world is either a missionary or a mission field.

If you are not actively involved in taking the gospel to others, it is a strong indicator that maybe you still haven't fully received it yourself – you're not a missionary, because you're still a mission field, needing to listen to what Christians are saying to you and needing to respond to the gospel, before you can in turn take it to others.

Now no-one is denying that it is costly to be a messenger of the gospel: in Verse 16 Jesus says: ***'I will show him how much he must suffer for my name'***.

The one who had been a persecutor, became one of the most violently persecuted people this world has known –specifically because he took the message beyond the religious beyond the Jews to the Gentiles.

But let's notice also the new relationship with Christians which was there for his support.

### 3. A new relationship with Christians.

Let me read verses 17-19: ***17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.***

Saul had gone to Damascus to lay hold on Christians there in violence. Now Ananias lays a hand of welcome on him. 'Brother Saul'. Isn't that moving?—these are the first words from Christian lips that he has heard since his conversion and they are words of family affection.

But that is what the church must always be doing – for if in persecuting the church, Saul was persecuting Christ, then in being reconciled to Christ, he is also reconciled to the Church. And Christians can't therefore hold grudges, because Jesus doesn't.

I'm sure you can think of parallel experiences where Christ through conversion brings two very unlikely Christians together. Charles Colson was one of Nixon's inner circle of advisers and was implicated in Watergate in the early 1970s.

Right in the middle of the crisis, Colson was led to faith in Christ by a man called Doug Coe. Coe set up a meeting between the newly converted Colson, a Right Wing Republican and an older Christian Senator Harold Hughes, a convinced Democrat of strongly liberal persuasion. Colson was very nervous. Hughes was as tough as nails, a strongly built and aggressive recovering alcoholic. He had disliked Colson intensely and hated everything he stood for.

Colson describes the two men as like two boxers in separate corners, as they met over dinner, with their wives and five others.

Then, quite suddenly, Hughes looked at Colson and said: 'Chuck, they tell me you've had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Would you tell us about it?' Colson told them haltingly and choking up at times how he had met Jesus Christ.

When he finished (he tells the story), 'for a moment there was silence. Harold, whose face had been enigmatic while I talked, suddenly lifted both hands in

the air and brought them down hard on his knees. 'That's all I need to know, Chuck. You have accepted Jesus and he has forgiven you. I do the same. I love you now as my brother in Christ. I will stand with you, defend you anywhere and trust you with anything I have.'

Colson was absolutely staggered. After the group had prayed together, Hughes gave him a great bear hug and Colson says: 'I needed no further explanation of what fellowship meant or what Paul meant when he said ***'let us have real affection for one another, as between brothers.'***

Saul had, as a result of his conversion a new relationship with Christians which was every bit as powerful as that.

But hold it together with his new relationship with the world. If Paul is going to be a messenger to the hostile unbelieving world he will need the support of Christian brothers and sisters.

We have a church vision statement which speaks about Growing Together and Reaching out. Our Mission Action Planning Group have been working away at the Reaching out bit of that for over a year now. A number of people have been saying that we need to focus now on Growing Together.

Fair enough! But the two aspects belong together. We don't give each other support as an end in itself. Fellowship should drive us outwards in mission.

So it is very important!

I like the way that Ananias this unknown disciple, with a walk-on part, himself has a commission - a direct order from heaven (which doesn't sound all that different to Saul's): Go – says Jesus. And Ananias speaks of himself as ***'sent'***. This fellowship is itself an expression of gospel obedience, you see.

It is not simple clubbishness. The in-crowd massaging the ego of others in the in-crowd. Love for other Christians is the outworking of a changed life.

That is what had happened to Paul – it showed itself outwardly in baptism but inwardly there was a changed heart with new relationships: a new relationship with God; a new relationship with the world and a new relationship with Christians.

And if you are wondering what difference it really makes to be a Christian, well: those three tests are what we need to assess whether that supernatural change has happened to us.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)