

ACTS 22.3-16: THIS IS OUR STORY

Next Sunday there will be no services in this church. For next Sunday is the Finale of the Chelmsford Christian Festival.

With 1000s of others we shall all be down at Central Park for a great celebration of faith. It will be the biggest Christian service ever put on in Chelmsford.

Interestingly, that service will be the only service held during the festival.

Apart from Amplify, the Friday night of praise and worship for young people, there will be no congregational singing at any of the Festival events.

- Tonight for instance there will be jazz, pop, Gospel and blues with Paul and Fiona Hendley Jones
- Monday night is Godspell – Tuesday night a talent show put on by the children of the town – Wednesday night is Tough Talk and the hip-hop artist Jahaziel, Thursday is the celebrity evening, and then on the Saturday the London Community Gospel Choir.

Of course people will be talking about Jesus – but there will be no hymns for people to sing.

It's all very different from the way we used to do mission.

Anybody here remember when Billy Graham came over to Haringey Stadium in 1954? Then we sang hymns every evening – people even sang 'Blessed assurance Jesus is mine' on the station platforms and in the trains as they made their way home.

My memory of that Billy Graham crusade was hearing Bev Shea singing: I could not understand why he would rather have 'cheese' than silver or gold. It was only later that I learnt that he would rather have 'Jesus' than silver or gold.

Things have changed – because our culture has changed.

In the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s we were still a Christian culture – people were not necessarily Christian, but they had a Christian background. As a result faith journeys were relatively short. Those were the days when you could put on a Christian mission and expect 100s, if not 1000s, to make a decision for Christ then and there.

But today most people are a long way removed from Christian believing.

Yes, as a result of the Christian Festival we hope that there will be those who will commit their lives to Jesus – we hope that there will be some conversions.

But our expectation is that there will be many more who will just begin the journey that leads to faith and to commitment. We recognize that today people need time to explore the Christian faith – time to consider the claims of Jesus.

For many people the ten-week Alpha course has been a great way in to the Christian faith. So later in the autumn we shall be running an Alpha course again.

Yet for some people even Alpha is premature. So on the five Sunday evenings we are running what a five-week course called 'Journeys' – it is a course for people who are struggling to believe in God, let alone in God's Son.

Yes, in today's culture, it often takes a good deal of time before people come to Christ. This morning, I want to look at what it means to come to Christ – what it means to be converted. And I propose to do this by looking at the story of Paul's conversion, as we find it in Acts 22.

1. LIKE PAUL WE NEED TO DECIDE TO FOLLOW JESUS

If ever a person had a dramatic conversion, it was Paul:

- One day he was persecuting the Christians, shutting them up in prison, voting for their death sentences
- The next week he was preaching the Good News, declaring Jesus to be the Son of God.

It was an incredible change - and I use the word 'incredible' advisedly.

As far as the 1st Christians were concerned, it was all a bit too much.

So when God called Ananias, a leader in the church of Antioch, to visit Paul, Ananias at first refused - "*Lord, you've got it wrong - this man has been our chief enemy*".

Ananias, found it extraordinarily difficult to believe that Paul could really have changed. It was an amazing conversion.

None of the three being baptized this morning have such a dramatic conversion story to tell. None of them have seen flashing lights or heard heavenly voices.

And yet each of them has a story to tell of how they decided to follow Jesus.

As you will discover, each of their stories is very different.

- Richard was a bit of a rebel – he came from a Christian home, but then became a bit of a rebel and gave up on the Christian faith. It was only in his 20s that he decided to follow Jesus.
- Frances too came from a Christian home – and although she never rebelled, she had to decide whether she wanted to live the rest of her life for Jesus.
- Jacqui has a very different story to tell – she was brought up not to believe. She had not darkened the door of a church until she had started to attend Alpha here. Compared to the other two, her decision to follow Jesus was much more dramatic.

But what counts is not the so-called conversion experience.

What counts is the decision to follow Jesus.

Yes even religious people like Paul need to decide to follow Jesus

Indeed, you might say that Paul needed to be converted from his religiosity.

Paul at the time of his conversion belonged to a crack spiritual outfit called the party of the Pharisees. He really did his best to please God. So much so, that he kidded himself that he was perfect – "**without fault**" (Phil 3.26) as he once put it.

But the turning point came when he realized that he could never be good enough for God: as he later wrote to the Romans: "**everyone has sinned**" (Rom 3.23).

In the light of God's perfection, even our best looks pretty awful. It's like the windows in our homes: in the half-gloom of winter they may look fine, but when the sun is shining brightly, all of a sudden we become aware that they are grimy and dirty.

Only Jesus can deal with our sin – only Jesus can put us right with God.

All of us need to be converted

- to change from living for self to living for Jesus
- to change from trusting in ourselves and in what we can achieve to trusting Jesus and in what he has achieved for us.

The precise nature of the conversion experience is unimportant: what is important is that we realise our need and do something about it.

2. LIKE PAUL WE NEED TO BELIEVE IN JESUS

I.e. we need to believe that Jesus died for us and rose for us.

There is a fascinating passage in 1 Cor 15 where Paul quotes a snippet from an early Christian creed which he was probably taught by Ananias before he was baptised: "**I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures; that he appeared to Peter and then to all twelve apostles**" (1 Cor 15.3-5)

This creed centres around two affirmations about Jesus:

1. Christ died for our sins as written in the Scriptures

The death of Jesus was no unfortunate accident - no untimely end to the career of an aspiring Jewish leader - it was all part & parcel of God's purposes, as evidenced in the writings of the OT prophets.

What's more, when Jesus died, he died "**for our sins**". This was no ordinary death. For when Jesus died, he died to deal with our sin, and with the consequences of our sin.

In the words of the old hymn:

*He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good
That we might go at last to heaven
Saved by his precious blood*

Christian believing centres on a Cross. The heart of Christian believing is the conviction that "**Christ died for our sins**".

Paul took this step of Christian believing when he declared "**the Son of God loved me & gave himself for me**" (Gal 2.20). What an amazing act of love that was!

2. Christ was raised to life three days later as written in the Scriptures

Paul believed in the Risen Lord. How could he do anything else? For there on the Damascus Road he had met with the Risen Christ.

He had always believed in Jesus - or rather, he had always believed that Jesus was dead and buried. But then he discovered that the Crucified was alive!

Christian believing centres on an empty Cross. The heart of Christian believing is the conviction that Jesus **was raised to life on the third day**, and is alive for evermore.

I find it interesting that when Paul defended himself before a hostile crowd in Jerusalem, he gave his testimony. He told his story of how he had encountered the living Lord Jesus. Were his hearers surprised, if not uncomfortable? They expected a legal argument/battle of words - but Paul put an end to their words.

I believe that the Christian faith is intellectually defensible - I am prepared to argue with anyone. The facts of the resurrection are impressive - the onus of proof is on those who deny. But the one unanswerable argument is the fact of human experience.

Almost certainly the most impressive element in this morning's service will not be the sermon, but rather the testimony of these three as they speak of their experience of the Lord Jesus, who died and rose for them.

3. LIKE PAUL WE NEED TO SEAL OUR COMMITMENT IN BAPTISM

When exactly did Paul become a Christian?

Did he give his life over to the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road?

I doubt it: a blind man, stumbling along with the help of friends, is hardly a picture of a man who has entered into newness of life.

That encounter with Jesus had to be assimilated. Paul had experienced Jesus - but intellectually and theologically he had to collect his wits.

According to Luke's account in Acts 9, Paul's temporary blindness lasted 3 days.

It only came to an end after Ananias had prayed with him **"at once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again"** (9.18).

As Ananias talked & explained to Paul the rationale of what had happened to him, the penny gradually dropped, with the result that as Ananias prayed, his eyes both literally & metaphorically were opened!

And then what? Ananias told him to get baptised: **"And now why wait any longer? Get up & be baptized, and have your sins washed away by praying to him"** (22.16)

Ananias says three things:

- **"Be baptized"**: Baptism is the natural way of responding to Jesus - indeed, it is the way Jesus laid down for all his disciples.
Literally Ananias said: **"get yourself baptised"** - the onus was on Paul - he had to ask for baptism. Likewise these three have had to ask for baptism - as a church we believe in believers baptism - nobody is baptized because of their parents/friends
- **"Have your sins washed away by praying to him"**. Water in itself doesn't cleanse
- Pilate washed his hands in vain after delivering JX to be crucified.
- Lady Macbeth washed her hands in vain after the murder of Duncan.
Sin can't be expunged with water, not even with the water contained in the baptistery.
Sin can only be expunged and lives can only be cleansed as we **"pray"** to Jesus, for as the apostle John wrote in his letter: **"the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin"** (1 Jn 1.7). Cleansing only comes as we pray to Jesus, as we put our trust in the Lord who died that we might be forgiven
- **And now why wait any longer?** I.e. don't delay getting baptised. Once you are convinced that Jesus died and rose for you, then baptism is the next step. Baptism is the moment when we give ourselves publicly to Jesus – it is the moment when we seal our commitment to him. It is the end of the beginning of our Christian journey.

Paul sealed his commitment to Jesus in baptism – so too should we.

Well enough of the apostle Paul - my concern is for you, the members of the congregation: Where do YOU stand in all this?

The good news of the Christian message =

- when Jesus died on the Cross, he died for you that you might be forgiven;
- when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose that you too might share in his life.

But this only becomes good news when we put our trust in Jesus and decide to follow him.