

Sermon at Christ Well on 11 November 2018 - Acts 9.1

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4)

That is the question the risen Jesus asked of Saul (better known to us as *‘Paul’*) on that fateful day on that fateful journey on the road to Damascus.

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Jesus asks. *“Who are you, Lord”*, Paul replies. *“I am Jesus who you are persecuting”* the voice replies and Paul, it seems, asked no more questions.

It’s a dramatic story of a dramatic encounter – and as we prepare to journey with Paul in the coming months, I am going to use this evening’s sermon to set the scene...to sketch in the background, as it were.

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” This is the point at which Saul becomes Paul! This is the point at which a transformation begins, wherein the man who had been the arch-enemy of the church up to that point – a man who had been arresting and imprisoning the early Christians – turns and becomes the early church’s most articulate spokesman!

Of the 27 books in our New Testament, just under half – thirteen in fact – are generally attributed to Paul. Clearly, he was the single most significant thinker in the early church, and his writings have been at the centre of every pivotal movement in Christian history since. He was the leading influence both on St Augustine and Martin Luther, who in turn was the key figure influencing the Protestant Reformation.

Yes, many people see the institutional church as being the creation of Paul rather than Jesus. Not an issue for me. At the very least, it is clear that it was Paul who pushed the Christian message beyond the geographical boundaries of Israel – becoming the *“Apostle to the Gentiles”*. Certainly, no figure apart from Christ Himself has so influenced the growth and development of the church in history as has Paul. Yet...he remains controversial, misunderstood, divisive, misused...even abused.

In order to understand this Damascus road experience, we need also to understand how Paul got there; at one level, there is no great mystery about that. Paul provides us with plenty of autobiographical material about himself in his letters and so we know well what his life was like prior to meeting Jesus.

“You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how thoroughly I ravaged the church of God and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my kinsmen, being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” (Galatians 1:13-14)

St Paul was a *‘zealot’* – that’s how he described himself. Yes, the term *‘zealot’* is normally reserved for militant revolutionaries – Jews who were intent on bringing an end to the Roman occupation of Israel and setting up an independent religious state. The the early Paul may have been exactly that kind of *zealot*.

Paul describes himself as having been trained as a scholar and a theologian rather than as a warrior. Even so, the division between church and state – between the theological and the political – is a rather artificial creation of the 20th century and certainly not one that St Paul would have recognised.

Paul was a Jew, and he was a strict Jew – *“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee”* (Philippians 3:5) – and as a strict Jew – a Hebrew of Hebrews – he shared in the great Jewish hope for the coming of the *Kingdom of God* as he understood that.

The writings of Paul’s religious contemporaries make it quite clear what constituted that hope. It was a hope for God’s own people worshipping the one true God in God’s own way in their own God-given land. This was a religious hope and a political hope: the two could not be separated.

It was a holistic hope of God’s own people worshipping in God’s own temple in God’s own land according to God’s own law, and Saul of Tarsus was zealous for that hope. Saul’s *zeal* was not something that expressed itself only in prayer. It expressed itself just as readily with a sword.

We do tread on dangerous ground if we look for modern-day parallels here. Some say we can see plenty of modern-day Sauls in the land of Israel today...the characters building *‘settlements’* and grabbing whatever land has been left to the Palestinians. Some commentators say they carry the Torah in one hand and a machine-gun in the other.

Yet...well, there are counterparts in militant Muslims who also believe that they are God’s own people trying to regain God’s own land that was promised

to them. Palestine produces its own Sauls. Nor should we forget the militant Christians who are, by and large, funding the militant Jews against the militant Muslims. Religious fundamentalism wears many guises, characterised by an unyielding belief in the fact that we are the *'chosen people'* and that everybody else is *not*. It is a form of *'tribalism'*. This continues to raise profound challenges for us.

II A form of tribalism was the religion of the early Paul – the *Pharisee of Pharisees* – and it was this tribalism of Paul's that led him to persecute the early church. People like Paul didn't start persecuting the church simply because they were heretics who believed in the wrong *'Messiah'*. There was a lot more to it than this.

In first century Judaism there were lots of beliefs about *'the Messiah'* circulating and there was a fair degree of flexibility within the religious establishment when it came to who or what you thought *'the Messiah'* was. Different Jewish sects had different beliefs about the Messiah, and that in itself did not exclude any of them from membership of the broader religious community.

What upset the establishment about the followers of Jesus was that from day one they started welcoming non-Jews into their midst, just as Jesus had done before them, and they consequently started watering down the requirements of the religious community - such as circumcision - by which a Jewish man marked himself as a person of faith. It was this anti-tribal multiculturalism that marked the beginning of the great separation – divorce - between synagogue and church.

This is why the early Paul hated the church – because they were diluting the true faith by welcoming non-Jews into their houses – and he hated them vehemently. If there's one group that a Pharisee like Saul hated more than the Romans, it was his fellow Jews who diluted the faith to the point where threatened the entire tribe.

So... Saul travels to Damascus. He's on a mission to purify the tribe, to preserve the faith, and to arrest and imprison those who would dilute the racial and religious integrity of his religion. And he encounters Jesus... and his entire world is turned upside-down.

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?"

Who could have predicted at that point that within a few years this same Saul of Tarsus – the great defender of Jewish tribalism – would be penning these words: *“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:26-28)?

The tribe has gone. The new creation has come. We are all one in Christ Jesus. There is no distinction. We may be immune to the fact of quite how radical this thinking was.

This story of Paul’s conversion turns up three times in the Book of Acts and he tells it all over again in the letter to the Galatians (chapter 1:11-24). Evidently it was a story he retold many times, presumably because the experience not only transformed him but also stayed with him for the rest of his life.

There are times when should contemplate our own journey to faith, of faith carefully, prayerfully, openly. Equally, it is important to contemplate the nature of the faith to which we have been led, called, particularly if it is at stark odds with any earlier worldly tribalism which we might have espoused. Certainly, we need to be reminded of the realities – the vision – which lay at the heart of the new faith, the emerging faith, the transformational faith which became central in the life of Paul. The tribe has gone. The new creation has come. We are all one in Christ Jesus. There is no distinction.