

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Fifth Sunday of Easter Year A 18 May 2014

Act 7.55-60 Ps 31.1-5, 17-18 1 Peter 2.11-25 John 14.1-14

‘They laid their coats at the feet of a young man Saul.’ What Luke is telling us is chilling. When the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body in Jerusalem, agreed that the man Stephen should be killed for his preaching about Jesus, Saul stood by watching.

Saul obviously thought the violent eradication of Jews who were saying that God had raised Jesus from the dead was a cause he should commit to. And if you ever doubted that violence breeds violence, think again. Luke says after that day, Saul ‘ravaged the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.’ (Acts 8.1-3)

It is easy to gloss over the appalling reality in these words. Saul, well educated, well born, behaves like a thug, or we might say today, a terrorist. And all because he is obsessively convinced that some of his own people are wrong about Jesus of Nazareth. Saul thought Jesus was a fraud, and now he would rather ‘stop his ears’ than give Stephen with whom he disagrees about Jesus a hearing!

Saul’s behaviour changed dramatically after he encountered the risen Jesus for himself. But he did not change before he had played scapegoat with Stephen’s life (it never works for long – scapegoating) and done a lot of damage to other people’s lives and families. I sometimes wonder how Saul felt about that day when he looked back. It makes me think that whenever he taught about forgiveness he must have had his own experience firmly in mind.

Later Saul will change his name to Paul and become the first and the most significant interpreter of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but not before he has re-read his Hebrew scriptures and understood them with new eyes. Remember Paul writes his letters before the gospels were written down. He has some oral traditions about Jesus handed on to him, stories and sayings, and his primary focus is on God’s purposes accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He writes his letters to small communities he has mostly started through his itinerant preaching; to people he knows; those are the authentic letters of Paul in our bibles.

Over time Paul will be imitated by those who come after him and want to further his teaching. They will do so in the manner acceptable then, of writing in Paul’s name, not their own. We would call it fraudulent. In the ancient world it was a form of tribute and was acceptable. Some of those writing in Paul’s name will be ‘on the money’ as they say. However, some will, in their efforts to promote the good news at any cost or accommodation to the times, create a socially conservative Paul who did not exist. They will falsely attribute to Paul, which some Christians follow *to this day*, teachings that have opposed the ending of human trafficking, women having the vote, and upheld the alleged ‘right’ of male heads of households to domestic violence.

Much later in Europe some Christians will make Paul more important in their understanding of God than Jesus. They won't realise that is what they are doing, but it will have a legacy that removes Paul from his world and turns him into someone he never became. Most appalling of all, Paul will be misused to scapegoat the Jews as 'Christ killers'.

Consider the witness of Stephen for a moment. He understood who Jesus really was, the one God has sent to us who opens the way between heaven and earth. It is the risen *and ascended* Lord, Jesus the crucified whom Stephen sees in his vision of 'the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'. This is an expression of Easter faith, the faith we are celebrating and reflecting upon in these fifty days of Easter. That understanding and faith, trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, was growing and developing at that time completely *within* Judaism. It is anachronistic to think there were any 'Christians' at this stage. Jews who followed the teachings of Jesus, who had come to belief that Jesus was the promised messiah sent by God to make God known, were called 'followers of the way'. Only later did the tag 'Christ-ians' come to be used; and only later did the Jews and Christians part company in a tragic and bitter split that divided families and communities. That split has kept people like you and I from understanding, sometimes even acknowledging the Jewish origins of our story as the body of Christ.

In the moment of his dying, Stephen alone of all those there that day sees God and the world aright. While those who would not even listen to him are stoning him to death, Stephen prays for them in the same way that Jesus prayed for forgiveness for his slayers. Like Jesus, Stephen, 'filled with the [grace of] Holy Spirit' refuses to engage in the same violent dynamic which is taking his life. He will not retaliate; he will not curse; he will not call for vengeance down upon his disordered, dis-graced executioners. It clearly must have rattled Saul. I hope it rattled them all, but Luke doesn't tell us about that, alas.

Saul would have expected Stephen to call down curses on his enemies. It was the honourable thing to do. Jewish martyrs had done it when persecuted by the Seleucid Empire centuries before. It was considered model behaviour. By contrast Jesus had said, 'Love your enemies' and 'pray for those who despitefully use you.'

When Jesus had gone home to Nazareth one time and preached God's forgiveness being available to all people's not just Israel, his hometown synagogue had tried to kill him. It is a story that occurs in Luke's gospel (Luke 4.14-30). The zealous Jews of Nazareth wanted to hear the usual message, God loves 'us' and hates 'them.'

That is what Saul would have believed but Paul, the man he became, preached a message of God's love being extended to all peoples: slave and free, Jew and Greek, even male and female - all equally.

So what is this forgiveness? It can be many things, but at its heart, God's forgiveness is our old, familiar world under new management. Over these weeks of Easter our readings invite us to explore aspects of what Easter faith means. Last week I said one thing it means is that our lives in the world of hard political realities and the making of complex decisions about how the common wealth is to be used, and our faith, must be in dialogue.

This week I am saying that with the way in which Jesus died, praying for his enemies, a way imitated by Stephen, unmasking our collusions in keeping God out of our world so that we can do as we like. If we humans are honest, we are all tarred with that same brush, more and less.

Now, a new power is let loose, one that remakes what is broken, restores what is lost and heals what is diseased in us and in this world and makes it possible for us to live this new reality, yes in part, but now 'on earth as in heaven'.

The resurrection of Jesus occurs at the end of each gospel and we can think that's how his story ends – alleluia, alleluia and pass the chocolate eggs. But that is just the beginning. This risen Jesus transformed Saul who became part of the ongoing story of God at work in this world.

For thanks be to God, 'Easter-ing' is now what we are to do. Saul allowed Jesus to 'Easter' in him and followed Jesus in his purpose of bringing God's wise, healing forgiving love to bear on all we are and do.

How are you and I also part of that story, here, now?