

THE 2016 PATRONAL FESTIVAL SERMON [Acts 9.26-31]

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It really is a privilege to be here. It's a privilege because of what you represent; a privilege to be in a place of care, of reflection, of study and of development. I hope I'm not going to stretch the passage from Acts too much by suggesting that one of the key questions that Paul and the disciples are dealing with is the question of *identity*.

It's an issue with which you will realise I have a certain familiarity, when I recently discovered my identity was different from what I had always assumed. It wasn't an exceptional story; there are probably other people here who have similar experiences. A clever newspaper reporter discovered that the person who had brought me up and whom I thought was my father, and who thought he was my father, was not in fact my father at all but someone completely different. It led to all kinds of interesting discussions. Underlying it of course was the issue of 'Who are we? What defines who we are? What makes us who or what we are?' In the 21st century, the trouble with that is it turns too easily into an obsession with who I am and how I make myself be what I want to be, how I create my own identity.

We need to remember the context of Acts 9. There had been a very severe outburst of persecution, with which Paul, then Saul, had been heavily involved. The disciples and the apostles had been scattered, some staying in Jerusalem but others scattered over most of what we would now call the Levant and as far as Mesopotamia. At the same time the Church had suddenly grown in unexpected ways; it had grown in Samaria, it had grown with the Ethiopian eunuch and it had grown with some gentiles. You can imagine the emotions of the small Jewish Christian Church in Jerusalem when Paul appears back: he comes into a context when that Church will be asking itself "Who are we, who are we as The Church?" – a question that many of us ask today. "Are we", they would have said to themselves, "Jewish? We thought we were Jewish but the Jewish authorities don't seem to think we are Jewish at all, in fact they keep trying to tell us that we are syncretistic, we brought in Samaritans, the heretical ancient enemies."

As always happens when there is persecution, there would have been many in the Church who said, "It must be because we have done something wrong". One of the characteristics of the victims of cruelty of all kinds is that they blame themselves for being victims. They assume "it's *my* fault".

The Church in Jerusalem would have been asking themselves, "Who is this Jesus character?" They hadn't yet fully worked it out although they knew this was someone who had transformed the world. Secondly, they would be asking, "What are forgiveness and salvation in practice? Can Jesus really do all

that stuff?" And confronted with their persecutor their third question would be, "Who is this man? We know his history, we know his character – he is brilliant, he was a great scholar in Jerusalem before he shot off to Damascus – but now he comes back having treated us very badly and says he is one of us. Can God's forgiveness reach out as far as him? Is he included? Is it possible to make him one of us? Is God the kind of God who does *that*? Surely the God we read about in our scriptures right through the Old Testament is one who defeats enemies, doesn't incorporate them, doesn't include them."

We face similar questions today. I had a particularly unpleasant letter from a very senior cleric which illustrated the question that Anglicans, and in fact every single denomination and Church that I have come across, are asking – "Are we a big tent or are we a little holy gathering? Are we the select who keep to ourselves only those who are really perfect?" The big issue which we continually face, and which every denomination is facing with equal ferocity at the moment, is that around changes in the understanding of human sexuality. When someone with same-sex orientation comes in, the question is asked, "Who is this? Is this someone whom God can include or not?" There are wildly different views all around the world and even within the Church of England, and in fact in most congregations. It's not only Anglicans who are facing this.

There is in every church a real tension about how we cope with this in a world in which, because of communications, because particularly of smartphones, tablets etc, we now have communication but we don't have *relationship*, and therefore we can't look at each other in the eye and love each other as we see Christ in each other. That's the great benefit of community.

So the Church today finds itself, as it has throughout history, with this same tension about the nature of God and the kind of Church that God calls us to be. It's even more severe in the world around us, where the loss of a sense of the eternal story of God has gone so deep that *we are who we make ourselves to be*. And the only way to do that safely is to shut out all those who challenge us, who make us feel uncomfortable. That gives an infectious insecurity which leads us to hate, vilify and demonise the other. This affects most of all the very young and the older. It affects those groups particularly because so much of the value that is ascribed to people depends on what they do. Therefore if I am too young to do very much, I have very little utility, I'm not intrinsically very valuable; or if I am older and retired, well, "It's just a waiting room for Heaven," as someone said to me quite recently. We had quite a robust discussion about that!

Which is why the College of St Barnabas is so good. In the 19th century, it started by taking those retired clergy found in workhouses, the very definition of those whom the society at the time had discarded as having no intrinsic worth. It continues to care for those whom the world may see like that but whom God sees as experienced and wise. And it gives them the same value as every other human being.

That takes us to Barnabas the Apostle. He knows the story of Paul, but he

does not judge in categories but in the reality of the person he sees in front of him. He looks at Paul and loves him. All of us hate it when we are pigeon-holed, when we are categorised, when we are put in a particular box, even if it's right. Barnabas is to be celebrated, not because he's nice to Paul, but because he's *real* about Paul. He understands the intrinsic reality of the man he is dealing with, and values him. Barnabas knows the Lord Jesus Christ and recognises that he brings change at any age, in any place to any person. He brings possibilities for the future that are infinite at all stages.

It's not always obvious. Paul was a person who in every circumstance, everywhere, always started arguments. He would have been a nightmare in a community – let's be honest about it. He would have been arguing with everyone and setting them right! But Barnabas sees what God is doing. He has a world view that is deeply embedded in who Christ *is*, and that shapes his understanding of the human beings he deals with. He takes a personal risk by bringing Paul in, the risk of everyone there ostracising him and saying, "If you're hanging out with that guy, we don't want to hang out with you". It's very hard to take a risk. For most of us, our tribe in the Church, the group in which we feel most at home, is our support and our security. But when that becomes true in the Church, the tribe is our deceit and our danger, because we lose sight of the wealth that God pours into the Church in God's foolishness, giving to people, whom we know to be quite unsuitable, the riches of the gifts of the Spirit. So Barnabas says to us, "Stop, listen, reach out, be confident that the God who created the Church and calls each Christian has the Church in his hands." That confidence is what enables us to hold on.

In far worse circumstances than in this country, a week ago I was in Cappadocia with the Ecumenical Patriarch, making a sort of pilgrimage round the churches that had been abandoned in 1924 after the Treaty of Lausanne and the Greek-Turkish war. He goes once a year, and we had a service in an abandoned church. Nobody worshipped in it except when he went, and because he can't visit them all every year, nobody had been there for perhaps 90 years. As we commented to each other afterwards, the church might have been abandoned by human beings, but it was not empty. As we came together as pilgrims and worshipped, it was full of the Holy Spirit of God.

We worship the God who raises Jesus Christ from the dead. The Church, whatever its situation, is in the hands of the God who does resurrection as a matter of course. And so identity starts with God; and hope starts with God; and confidence in the future starts with God. It is demonstrated here as you live out a community of love. It's a huge challenge, but in a community that has Christ at its centre there is that great ending of Acts 9. That beautiful last verse talks of the Church having peace, of being in unity, of working together, of growing and of the Lord drawing to the Church those who are being saved. It's a lyrical passage to which we should come back in hope and expectation. They have the comfort of the Spirit, they have peace, they have growth.

May God bring us, in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion and his people around the world, to that same place of peace, hope and growth.