

SERMON – THE DAMASCUS MOMENT - SAUL TO PAUL The Heart of Our Christian Cal.

SO, Saul to Paul. THE Damascus moment. Is it any exaggeration at all, to say that no other encounter with the risen Christ, has had such far-reaching consequences as this one? Because no human agency, has done more to change the shape of the world to the shape of Christ, than Paul. Anyone who has read historian Tom Holland's book **Dominion** (and Tom Holland's not a Christian) will get the full enormity of just how much Paul has impacted of the shape of human history.

So how do you respond to this astonishing transformation one man, and the magnitude of its impact. Because there's probably 2 ways, we can all respond.

Understandably, we could look at this Damascus moment and feel a little daunted by it. It's so dramatic that our own faith journey can feel a little tame by comparison. So it could lack a sense of relevance to our lives.

OR, (and I'm of this persuasion) ... we can look at the **essence** of what took place for Saul to Paul and still see the same characteristics of transformation, that are completely part our ongoing journey of growth and formation in Christ.



Namely,

- **Like Paul we can come to a deeper understanding of who God is, and how this impacts how we live out our Christian faith.**
- **Like Paul, the scales can fall from our eyes, and we get a deeper insight into our own failings**
- **Like Paul, we can find a deeper meaning and purpose for our lives and the centrality for Christ for our lives.**

And not least, encouragement from these words that God gives to a very reluctant Ananias...

“Go to Saul, for he is my chosen instrument to take my message to the world.

Now Ananias (very understandably) doesn't think that this is a very good idea of God's. He tells God, isn't this the man who's going around doing terrible things to followers of Christ.

I get encouragement from this. Because it's confirmation once again that redemption is always on offer. God is always ready and willing to use a broken instrument to help play the gospel symphony. I find this re-assuring.

And again, I have to say that because of my own conversion/transformation experience, this Damascus moment has always resonated very deeply.

My encounter with the risen Christ may have happened differently to Paul's, but the core FRUIT of the encounter is essentially the same. I was lost but then I was found. My life was totally transformed and turned around. And like Paul, the course of my life was changed forever. The big difference of course was the impact that Paul's transformation had on the shape of human history. But this doesn't daunt me, it totally inspires me.

Like Paul, we can all make a difference in our own 'spheres of influence', whatever they maybe.

We can all bring the shape of Christ into our everyday lives to make small but precious changes to the shape of our relationships and our communities.

And it's this I really want to drill down into today.

Because I think there's a really profound message in what we see taking place in this change of Saul to Paul. Paul was so transformed by the renewing of his mind, that he produced a legacy of faith, hope and love for millions of people ... and it still has the power to be an immense inspiration for all of us.

So here's the two questions I want to dig deeper into.



WHAT'S THE MOST PROFOUND CHANGE WE SEE IN PAUL'S HEART AFTER ENCOUNTERING THE RISEN CHRIST?

And how does this change then shape Paul into the man, who has such a profound impact on the shape of the world?

So let's start with this. Because you couldn't get a more dramatic demonstration of this change, than 2 verses from our scripture passages today. This is 'Saul to Paul' in 2 verses.

Firstly, these words.



This is Saul on the road to Damascus. **9 Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.**

Now just pause for a moment and take in the fullness of what these words are revealing to us, about the state of Sauls, before encountering Christ. And remember Saul considers himself a Godly man as do all his religious peers. By His own estimation, Saul's an expert of the law and Holy Scripture.

Which is why for me, the most telling, (and actually the most chilling word) in this verse, is the word **'eager'**. Not only is Saul, a man of God, prepared to kill. He's eager for it. Uttering threats with EVERY breath.

But now hear these are the words, AFTER His encounter with the risen Christ, after His transformation. This is Saul now Paul, in his letter to the Romans



"Love your neighbour as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to a neighbour. Love is the fulfilment of the law.' I love that description from Paul on what it looks like to LOVE.

Love does **no harm** to other people. As we all know, we can harm people and they us, with our destructive words and actions. But love never seeks to hurt or harm to demean or diminish another person.

For me, this is the most telling and therefore the most significant truth that Paul totally grasps about the shape and the Way of Christ. **THAT THE HIGHEST EXPRESSION OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH IS LOVE.**

Paul now totally **'gets'** the profound truth of the 2 greatest commandments given by Jesus Christ ... **"Love God, love neighbour."**

He totally 'gets' the profound truth given by Christ that it's ONLY through our expressions of kingdom love that people will recognise that we are HIS followers.

Notice by the way that Jesus doesn't say, 'show your superior, biblical theological knowledge to one another and by **this** everyone will know you're my disciples. It's by our expressions of love to one another, that everyone will KNOW that you belong to ME.

This is what Paul totally gets. Take a look at all of Paul's letters to the early church and we see this truth of this everywhere. Here's a few notable examples.

- To the Colossians - **Above all clothes yourselves in love."**
- To the Ephesians - **17 I pray, that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide, long, high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—so that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**
- And of course, 1 Corinthians 13 - **Only 3 things remain, only will last into eternity, our faith, our hope and our love. And the greatest of these, is the transformative, healing restorative power of LOVE.**

And Paul makes it really clear, that all those other Christian gifts ... **"speaking in tongues, the gift of prophesy, all knowledge, yeah these are all great, but if we are not able to love others, they all count for nothing."** None of these are the defining features of our faith. **LOVE is the highest expression of our Christian faith.**

And the beautiful thing about Paul is that he dedicated his life to showing us what these expressions of Love actually looked like. And he urged and encouraged all the Church communities to live them out. **Love is patient, love is kind, its not proud, it protects and trusts.** **Think of all those verses from Paul known as the 'One Another' verses.** **Here's just a few but there are so many more.**



• Care for one another (1 Cor 12:25)
• Serve one another (Gal 5:13)
• Bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2)
• Forgive one another (Eph 4:2)
• Be kind and compassionate to one another (Eph 4:32)
• Look to the interests of one another (Phil 2:4)
• Comfort one another (1 Thes 4:18)

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- Look to the interests of one another (Philippians 2:4)
- Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

What are these qualities, if not the out workings of Christ like love?

SO ... WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT FOR ALL CHURCH COMMUNITIES TO KEEP REMINDING OURSELVES ABOUT THIS TRUTH? ESPECIALLY FOR THE TIMES IN WHICH WE NOW LIVE.



This is Deeply Personal to Christ.
Saul felt for the general and heard a voice calling to him. "Saul Saul!
Why are you persecuting me?"
"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.
And the voice replied,
"I am Jesus,
the one you are persecuting!"

WELL FIRST AND FOREMOST I WOULD SAY THIS.
This is deeply personal to Christ.

There's a lot being revealed in that crunch moment when Saul with murder in his heart, collides with the risen Christ. Look at the words exchanged. **4 Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" 5 "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!"**

Clearly for Jesus, the hatred in Saul's heart is an affront an injury to Him personally. To persecute those who aspire to follow his way and truth of the Way of LOVE, is to persecute Christ Himself. Its deeply personal.

We see the same thing in His new commandment.

34 A new commandment I give to you: Love one another as I have loved you. This is how you will prove to the world that you are MY disciples." Our works of love are a response to the love given to us.

And all this massively echoes the only passage in scripture where Jesus gives us the criteria for final judgement, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. **"Whatever you do (are doing) for the least of my brothers and sisters ... you are doing it for ME"**.

Whenever and wherever, the body of Christ is showing acts of LOVE to the poor, the hungry, the sick and the prisoner, we are doing it for Christ. It's deeply personal. So if its deeply personal for Christ, then it has to be deeply personal for you, me and every church community.



**The second reason this truth is so important is this.
THE CALL FOR LOVE TO BE OUR HIGHEST EXPRESSION,
IS CRUCIAL FOR THE TIMES IN WHICH WE NOW LIVE.**

We live in an increasingly fractious and fragmented world and the call for the church to truly be the salt and light of love in this world, is both pressing and urgent.

If we look back at the history of the Church down the centuries and right up to the present day, isn't it crystal clear, that Christianity always loses the plot, when it loses sight of this core commandment from Jesus Christ. That Love is the highest expression of our faith. It's our highest calling. It's when we lose sight of this, that we can tend to shoot ourselves in the mission foot.

I was talking to someone yesterday from our Saturday prayer team about all the new and exciting green shoots in our ministry and community, and they said to me "what's really encouraging to see is that there's a real spirit of unity in the Church". And I confess for me, this is really pleasing to hear.

Given what we've all been through, where emotions across the country have been running high and opinions running strong, I think its testimony to the spirit of this community that we've stayed rooted and established in love. We've remained a Church community prepared to learn from each other and grow with each other, so that together, we can become filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

AND FINALLY, WHY IS THIS TRUTH SO IMPORTANT?

Because I truly believe that the reason Paul had such a profound impact on shaping the world into the shape of Christ... is because he totally grasped this compelling truth. The centrality of LOVE for our Christian Faith.

And how telling is it, that the writer of John's Gospel also got the magnitude of this truth? **God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them."** **If we don't KNOW love, then we don't know God.** But the more we express love live out love the more we are knowing God.

FINAL THOUGHT

The *kind* of God we believe in, really does have a profound effect on every aspect of how we live out our faith.

If we believe that God is a God of condemnation ready to smite us when we stuff up in life, then we will tend to live (even if its unconsciously) in the shadow of condemnation. And I've seen how this leads to us doing harm to ourselves and we can do harm to others. We project this onto others. Its at the root of all toxic religion. This was Saul before Paul.

But if we believe that God is first and foremost a God of grace and mercy, (as Jeremy said last week, "accept that you are accepted," this makes a huge difference to how you treat yourself and how you treat others.

If you believe in a God whose primary concern ... is the healing and restoration of ALL things through the power of transformative LOVE, Christ's love, then how does this impact your sense of worth – your sense of Hope – your sense of what mission looks like in God's world?

Love is deeply personal to Christ. So it has to be deeply personal to HIS Church

Love one another as I have loved you, and by *this* everyone will know you are my disciples.