

Sermons at the All Saints Anglican Church, Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Geoff Read on Sunday 4th May 2025

Text: Acts 9:1-20

What do you say if someone asks you what you do on a Sunday morning?

It maybe that you are still under cover in your faith, not ready to go public, so what do you say?

Or maybe you are quite comfortable about others knowing what you do? So you say: I go to or I attend church

But how about shifting the language even more and saying something like: I join with others at the church where I belong, to enjoy being together as we worship together and encourage one another

In the NT reading we have today about we read about the early church that grew up in the time after the resurrection of Jesus

And the words used by them and about them really matter

Back at the start of Acts 8 we read about the persecution of the church by Saul, who later becomes Paul

Any of you who are digging down into the news from Ukraine may have heard of the Locked Faith project of the Institute for Religious Freedom based in Kiev

It is monitoring the impact of the Russian invasion since 2014 on faith-based communities in Ukraine regarding freedom of speech, conscience, and religion – Orthodox and also Protestant, charismatic and Muslim

And their findings suggest that something not unlike what we read in Acts 7, 8 & 9 is going on to impose the faith of the Russian Orthodox church in Ukraine and repress expressions of other faith communities

I have been reading about the experience of fellow priest and religious leaders who are in detention and trying to pray for them personally

And what is especially painful is that the persecution is by Christians against Christians

And here is the thing about language

At the start of Acts 8 the language is of “persecution against the church” (v1 & 3

Flip on to chapter 9 and the writer gets more granular, more personal

In v1 Saul breathes “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and in v2 “any who belonged to the Way

The Way is a name that seems to be used of an echo of those following the Jesus who says He is the Way”



As Saul travels the 200km plus from Jerusalem to Damascus in Syria we hear of an amazing encounter – a light from heaven and a voice

And note what the voice says and the question it asks

Not why do you persecute my church but why do you persecute me?

Saul's reply shifts from What to Who – Who are you, Lord

And the answer comes: I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Last week I spoke about the first encounter of Jesus with the dps in the Upper Room

A door is locked for fear of what? The same persecution and fate that has happened to Jesus

The risen Jesus comes to them twice

Each time He is able to appear by moving through locked doors

But at the same time the body with which he comes is able to be touched, he eats and bears the scars of the persecution

Jesus' resurrection body is the same but different, pointing to how God gives a unique way of being, a physicality suited for the time and space we inhabit now, and then one also for the dimension of eternity to which death and resurrection are now the doorway

And in our Acts 9 reading we are encountering this resurrection Body of Christ uniquely adapting again for its context

This same Saul will become the apostle Paul, will go on to speak of the church as the Body of Christ, called into being together by baptism into His death and resurrection, and filled with His Holy Spirit

And here are the first glimpses of that here in the story of Ananias

Take a look at v 11ff

The blinded Saul is led into the city, to a house in Straight Street. As he prays, he has a vision of a man called Ananias coming to him, laying his hands on him and restoring his sight

At the same time that man, Ananias, is also having a vision of Jesus saying the same thing

Jesus calls Ananias by name and tells him about Saul

But its not for the first time Ananias has heard that name

Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” (9:13, 14)

Go, comes the reply – as Jesus tells Ananias how He will use Saul in a unique way, including showing him “how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

And so Ananias does go

And as he goes you could say the church in that place is really born ...

... as through the power of the cross enemies are reconciled and the good news flows in healing and forgiveness and being filled with the Holy Spirit at the hands of Annanias

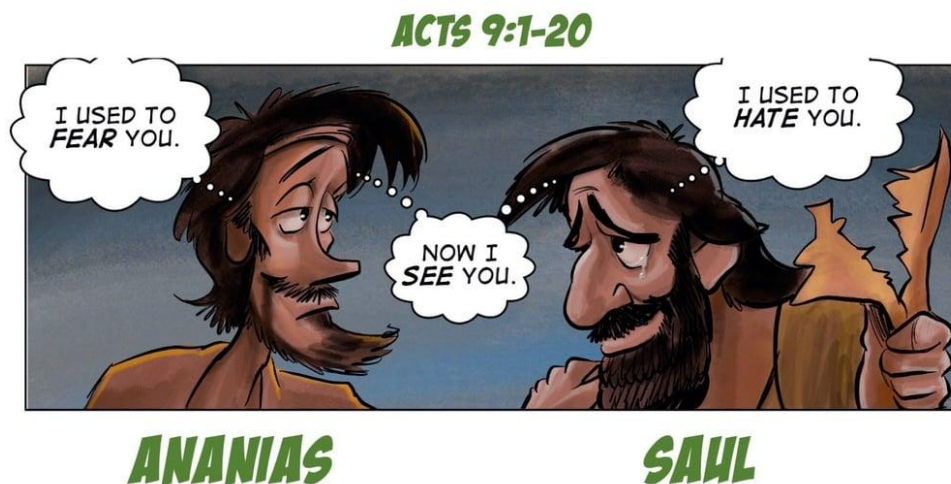
And the shift is from “going to” something to belonging to one another.

Note how the “this man” Ananias had talked about in v13 becomes “Brother Saul” in v17

And the context in which all this happens is suffering and the barriers that both cause it and that result from it

Imagine what that must have been like for Ananias – walking down Straight Street, pausing outside the door, going in, seeing this man he had every reason to see as a monster

Imagine for Saul – blind, so vulnerable, stripped of the power now literally in the hands of those he saw as the enemy



All of this is another expression of the resurrected Body of Christ

That Body is uniquely adapting in the power of the Holy Spirit to be present anywhere and everywhere Jesus chooses, incarnated into the needs, the cultures – always the same but different

And there seems to be a red thread running through this which is the response to suffering

A cross centred and cross shaped way of responding that we have come across before – its in the nail prints in the hands of the risen Jesus and the scar in His side, the costliness of the cross and also its power to transform people and situations

In his book “Prayer”, Richard Foster asks how we as followers of Jesus “enter into the suffering that is in the world in a way that is redemptive and healing”?

He answers: If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is in our power to give them and this will lead us into prayer.”

Note that Richard Foster asks and answers the question saying “we”

“We”, the Body of Christ happens where the Jesus of the cross touches the lives of we, who in human terms, have every reason to hate, to reject, be fearful, have little or nothing to do with one another but who yield our own agendas and instead obey His command to gather and to love in His name

Which is why what we say about Church, this church matters so much – do we just attend, go to ... or do we belong

Three years ago we adopted a Belonging statement for exactly this reason out of the painful and hard work of starting to address issues of racial justice

During this a French speaking person with a beautiful French accent asked: can I belong to this church and read the Bible in its services

Or can I only be a guest as, while I may be white and European, I am not British

Who we are and what we are: the Body of Christ, All Saints has been brought into being at such a cost by the Jesus who asked Saul, “Why are you persecute me?”

But who does so in order that even he, Saul, can become part of that same Body, complete with its nail marked hands and pierced side, signs of the transforming power of that cross-shaped love