

Sermon Archive 244

Sunday 5 May, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 9: 1-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



On Saturday 27 April, a nineteen-year-old trainee nurse (a person training in the art of healing people) entered a San Diego synagogue with an assault rifle, and started shooting. He went there and did that because he hated Jews, and wanted to kill some. The weekend before, in Sri Lanka, a group of others went to some churches wearing suicide vests, and blew up 250 Christians - simply because they were Christians. And the previous month, of course, here in our city, 50 people (now 51) were killed purely because they were Muslims. Religious hate crimes seem very much part of our world now. I suppose they always have been. For decades Ireland had the troubles between Catholics and Protestants. For ages in India, there was the violence between the Hindus and the Muslims. Let's not mention the Crusades (whoops we did mention them once in a franchise, but maybe we got away with it!!). And way back in the day, David becomes the glamorised wunderkind because he fells Goliath for being a Philistine. It's tempting to interpret religious hatred as something almost as deep as DNA - as if its origins reach back to Cain killing Abel. Human beings have a long history, a deep experience, of hating and killing one another - much of it clustered around identity, difference, culture. Maybe we'd better just get used to it - because it's deep-seated and never going to change.

Saul from Tarsus went into synagogues to find people of a particular religious faith - so he could kill them. Of Saul, one frightened early Christian was heard to say "I've heard of this man - he's never going to change". But the man **did** change.

The nineteen-year-old Jew hater. The self-immolating Christian haters. The 38-year-old Muslim hater. Such is their prevalence on our news scape, they distress us that this is the standard new form of the deep-seated normal. They frighten us into thinking that things will never change for the better. They discourage our hope. But then Saul stumbles on the road to Damascus, and we have some thinking to do.

-ooOoo-

Long desired change for the better! Wouldn't it be great if we lived in a world where God just intervened and put things right! If some kind of god could just come along, with some magical kind of zap, and knock the "baddies" off their horses! Deus ex machina - halting the evil for us in its tracks. It's not unreasonable to want to live in that kind of world, is it? Some suggested exactly that kind of world to Jesus a few times, didn't they? "If you're the Son of God, throw yourself off this cliff and the angels will catch you." [Matt 4:6] (Divine intervention.) Then much later, those with a similar kind of voice said "Let him come down now from his cross; he trusts in God; let God deliver him now". [Matt 27:42] (Divine intervention.) Jesus responded to that suggestion just by dying. No miraculous rescue by a great intervenor on that Good Friday. So, now we deal carefully with the story of Saul. Saul is indeed halted (happy accident, blessed coincidence, lucky break), but there is a whole lot of other quite subtle and important extra texture to his conversion. Three things!

The first thing. The first words spoken to Saul, as he's falling, are "Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." On a whole lot of levels, I can imagine Saul being confused by that. First reaction might be "I haven't been persecuting Jesus. I've been persecuting a bunch of stupid Christians. How can you persecute someone who's already dead? I've not been persecuting Jesus!" Yet the voice Saul hears on the road to Damascus says the arrest warrants, the binding, the beating, the killing, has been directed at Jesus. This could only be true if we believed that Jesus and the people were one. As if Jesus might have expressed a deep spiritual truth when saying "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The mystery of God's solidarity with the people! Human beings as creatures held within God's tragic sympathy! If you **really** believe that people are precious in God's sight, that they are one with God (family, bearers of the sacred image, children of God), are you going to be able to shoot them? Part of the change that no one expected from Saul of Tarsus, is Saul's learning from God that God loves the people. Yes, God could intervene with a miraculous zap - but God could also speak to the rebel heart about unity and love.

What else is part of the world within which Saul changes? The second thing.

Within the world of the miraculous change, there are the people with whom

Saul is travelling. We don't know much about them. They can't have been Christians; otherwise Saul would have arrested them and sent them back to Jerusalem. We can only assume that they must have been people who were deemed by Saul to be suitable for the work - willing to take instruction, willing to kill - perhaps the same kind of people who later might say at Nuremberg Trials "we were just obeying orders" - compliant complicitors. We **do** know that they were capable of being frightened or confused - since we're told that they ended up, as light shone and people fell, standing speechless. We also know, that despite their being speechless, they didn't run away. They changed gear. They moved into the task of taking the blind and traumatized Saul by the hand (by the hand - is that a tender and parenting image?), and brought him into the city. They led him to a safe house. Within the world within which Saul miraculously changes, people surprise him with care. He might have expected from hired thugs that they wouldn't care. He might have expected from frightened people that they would run and take cover. But he finds them, arrested by the moment, doing something primitively compassionate. They might not be virtuous people - but here they silently do the right thing - leading the blind, finding sanctuary for the frightened. God could just zap a miraculous change - but here Saul is experiencing human compassion.

What else is part of the world within which Saul changes? The third thing of three. Within that world, we find Ananias - a person of the Christian faith - someone vulnerable to the persecution. Like the rest of us, he's kind of frightened by how the world is turning. When first he's confronted by the possibility of coming into contact with the great persecutor, he's not keen at all. He's the one mentioned earlier in the sermon - the Christian who says "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done". But, under the encouragement (or should that be insistence) of God, he manages his fear. He does the courageous thing. He approaches the violent one, and says to him "Brother Saul". (I wonder if centuries later, an elderly man of faith might greet a Christchurch gunman with the greeting "Welcome brother".) The world within which Saul makes a miraculous change is a world within which people, gently, embracingly, are brave. Yes, God could just zap a crazy killer - but here God is enabling people to be kind and brave. It's within **that** that miracle changes occur.

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That's probably enough now about Saul on the road to Damascus. Let's leave our Bible story there, and come back to our world - to our sad new normal of religious hate crime and fear of violence. What are we to do here?

I suppose we could pray to God for a great intervention. We could pray that the haters might just fall off their horses. Yes, sometimes that happens. In Australia, "One Nation" electoral hopefuls do sometimes get found in strip clubs and in compromising conversations about donations by American gun lobbies. The bad agenda grinds to a halt all by itself. Thank you, Jesus; that was easy and worked out well. Praise the rare and unexpected miracle . . . until the next hateful bigot comes forward to fill the vacant space. Waiting for Godot, waiting for god, while the next deed of violence finds form.

How about, while we wait for god to act, we nurture the other more human-located things of the conversion of Saul? How about we speak to our world of the deeper God who is one with the people? How about we speak about human beings as precious, as bearers of sacred image, of profound value? And how about we take those who have fallen, or are falling, by the hand and lead them to a place where they can become well? How about we surprise the frightened by small acts of kindness in the necessity - so that they might think a second time? How about working to put aside the natural fear we feel - and dare to say "Brother Saul; welcome brother"? How about giving ourselves to the shaping of a world that's fit for incubating a miraculous change?

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On Saturday 27 April, a nineteen-year-old trainee nurse entered a San Diego synagogue with an assault rifle and started shooting. He went there, and did that, because he hated Jews and wanted to kill some.

Will that be the end of that? A people of faith is called to build a world within which we nurture miraculous change.

Blindness to sight. Alienation to community. Hatred to love.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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