

## Sermon Archive 536

Sunday 4 May, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Acts 9: 1-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It's a good story, full of good things. A summary of them?

1. Hate is caused to fall on the road.
2. Fear is overcome
3. Mercy is done.
4. Truth opens a new future.

Let's explore that.

### **Part One**: hate is caused to fall on the road

Here comes hate, racing down the road. How do we know? Is there something about the agitation in its step? Can you pick an agitated gait from a distance? Or the look upon the face? Faces are ambiguous - they show, but they also hide. It's probably not about anything being whispered under its breath, because we don't really do that, do we? In this instance it's not wearing a gang patch. It's not tattooed with anything to give it away - because as an observant Jewish hater, it doesn't believe in inking the skin (happy to kill people, but doesn't ink the skin - nice to have standards).

It's easier, isn't it, when hate wears a helmet, or moves on caterpillar tread, or screams like a Stuka. But **this** hate doesn't move or sound like that. It's more subtle - not a war machine, but a person - one who maybe builds your trust until you say "yes, that's who I am" before he orders someone to kill you for being "who you are". How does he know you're a person of faith? He only knows if you tell him . . .

We first met him in the episode when young Stephen, as convert to faith, made the mistake of outing himself to the authorities, who stoned him for heresy. We're told that Saul watched the killing, holding the cloaks of those who did the deed. We're told that he approved of what he saw. And since then, he's been more and more committed to continuing the removal of this belief group.

The removal of members of a particular group solely because they belong to that group is called "genocide". The United Nations General Assembly described the elements of genocide in 1951, as:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Genocide tends to be done by those who have power, to those who don't. And because of that dynamic, it's really hard to stop - unless someone from the outside intervenes. Why would anyone intervene? Who would intervene for the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar? Who would intervene for the Tutsi of Rwanda? Who would intervene for the Jews, Gays and intellectually disabled of Germany?

These things tend not just to stop in their tracks.

Except in this story of Saul on his murderous way to Damascus. Suddenly this emissary of hatred just stops. Something meets him on the road, and knocks him off his feet.

That's why this is a good story.

**Part Two:** fear is overcome

In the world created by those who hate and have lots of power, I guess it's inevitable that the frightened will stay at home. Two short examples from the recent documentaries "Queer Aotearoa", made by TVNZ.

Mike Puru, gay as anything, but scared what his outing would mean for his media career in the late 1990s, said:

*There was always paranoia, which probably wasn't healthy for the relationship. It was as simple as whether or not you went out to a concert together, because when you were out at restaurant together, you started thinking "people might start working out what's going on here". So I tried to avoid those situations really. And [it was] a lot of missed opportunities, I guess, to bond with my partner a bit more.*

Actor, dancer, choreographer, producer, and trans-woman, Amanaki Prescott-Faletau, said:

*It's hard to explain. When you know that the world doesn't love you and they're after you, why would you want to leave the house? Yeah, I don't. I don't want to leave the house. And now I'm a lot more wary of the toilets, and where the*

*toilets are - just like man! And then that was never an issue. But now I'm just like, I don't want to use the toilet - so I want to go home just to use the toilets.*

Rather than deal with the world of hate, Mike and Amanaki stayed at home.

**Ananias** is at home. He's aware that his world is full of hate for who he is. Not only is it kinder on him just to stay home, he can also calculate in his mind that staying at home is his duty to his family. He knows that someone like Saul is out there in the world, doing things of hate. It would be better to stay at home, and not engage.

But now, goodness knows why, who can explain it, Ananias is having to deal with this new conviction that he needs to get out of the house, and meet with the exact one whom he fears. He's called to leave his house, go out there, and to face the hater.

Not surprisingly, he expresses reluctance. "I have heard from many about this man", he says. "How much evil he's done; what power he has to bind all who invoke the name". When he expresses his reluctance, is he speaking from fear? I suspect he *is*, and that it's well founded. But this is a strange story. Already hatred has been stopped in its tracks. And now fear, if not stopped in its tracks (since I think Ananias probably goes forth still in fear), is at least managed in a braver way. Despite whatever fear he holds, Ananias says "yes" to meeting with the hater.

We did not expect the hate to fall. We did not expect the fear to stop. But now the story shall be of a meeting.

**Part Three:** mercy is done

In the meeting, mercy is done. The frightened one, Ananias, lays his hands on Saul - the laying of hands is an act in their culture of healing and of blessing. It's a gesture of faith, and of connection. It can't be done from afar. Ananias uses Saul's name, and calls him his "brother", and bids him be well.

Where once there was hate in one corner, and fear in the other, now in the middle there is an act of mercy. One says to the other "be healed, receive the Spirit". Whereupon something like scales fall from the eyes of hatred, and he sees not a despised person in front of him, nor a frightened person in front of him, but a brother.

Thanks be to God.

**Part Four:** truth opens a new future

From this time forth, Saul becomes Paul, and becomes part of the future that has been calling him. We're told he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying "he is the Son of God". This is the proclamation that we have inherited. We become part of the joy of living it - with its grace, forgiveness, new community, and hope.

For us to have got to this point, it's required a new sense among the haters of being wrong, and having fallen. It's required a new sense among the frightened of finding a confidence and power. It's required a moment of grace, when error meets mercy.

And that is where this part of the story meets a natural chapter ending.

-ooOoo-

It could easily have been just another story of another killing. Another example by which we accept the lot of the Rohingya Muslim, the Tutsi. Another cementing of the power of hatred and fear - all so predictable! Just stay at home.

Key to it's not being that kind of story, is the intrusion into the plot of the voice of Christ - heard by both actors initially only reluctantly.

Reluctantly by Saul, because he's got a clear vision of who he needs to kill next.

Reluctantly by Ananias, because he's just too scared.

But to each of them comes the voice of Christ.

To Saul: "Saul, why do you persecute me?"

To Ananias: "Ananias, get up and go!"

The hearing of the voice is that which drives this fanciful story - towards a new joy and life . . .

"What a shame", the critic might say, "that ours is not a world where the voice of Christ is heard". To which we, in protest might say "O really? Is it not? What are we listening for now? Who are we becoming, as we hear this story? Is something not happening to our hatred as we listen? Is not something failing in our fear? A new hope, a new grace, a new courage - as we listen for the voice of Christ."

Speak, O Christ, for we keep a moment of quiet.

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