

St. Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Revd Rob Lamerton

Acts 9.1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5.1-14; John 10.22-30

What a week for terrible events, with the crazy killing of 32 people in Virginia by a lonely, depressed and angry young man—and we find out that he had been bullied at school. The crazy stupidity of it all! Would it not be have been easier and are better to legislate against gun ownership and to be more accepting and aware about people with depressive illness? The continued bombings in Baghdad have killed well over 300 people this week, with 250 dead in one day. One answer is to isolate communities by building walls between them and increasing separation. Surely it would be better to help the communities talk to each other?

Then, of course, there has been the very sad death of Audrey Fagan, the ACT's Chief Police Officer, who gave policing a more understanding image.

And for me, there was a quick trip to Adelaide to visit my mum and dad. My dad, Bob, has recently gone into respite care in a residential aged care facility, while my mother Josie faces surgery to remove a cancerous kidney, following radiotherapy on her spine. Six months ago, Mum was walking unaided on the beach with our dog. Now she moves very slowly with a walking stick.

For me, it has been a week of wrestling with practical and emotional issues of aging parents, as well as viewing the madness and sadness of the world from a safe vantage point in front of the television.

I achieved two things with my mum that I want to mention in connection with the story about St Paul in today's reading from Acts chapter 9. The first was walking along the beach with my mother at Brighton/Somerton Park where I grew up. The connection with St. Paul is that it was there on that beach that God spoke to me most while I was growing up. Not in the way that we often think of God speaking, but in a quiet affirmation of God's presence. I have always believed that religious experience is a blend of the realities around us with the openness of our spirit to experience and discern God.

The other thing I did with Mum was to go to St Philip's at Somerton Park to sit and ponder and pray with her. Mum has been a member of that parish it for about 54 years. It was there that I used to go, Sunday by Sunday, to put that broader understanding of God that I found on the beach into focus, by listening to the stories of Jesus from the Gospels. It was also the place of participation in the company, the companionship, of the faithful.

It was good to be taken back, to think about how faith is about pondering the realities of life in the widest possible sense, but then having it focused on the person of Jesus among the people of God. I put it this way because:

- I think we can see the same pattern in the experience of Saul (who became Paul); and
- that is what we are attempting to do in our gathering at the Denise's place this evening — to take our experience of God in the reality of life and bring it into focus, in the company of other people of faith.

I think we can safely assume that Paul had heard of and possibly even witnessed the ministry of Jesus. But because it offended his Pharisaic training and interpretation, he sought and gained authority from the High Priest to go to Damascus and take captive any who belong to "The Way" and bring them to Jerusalem. (Such violence is still a common response to religious difference!)

Was it a totally inward experience for Paul as he pondered the connection between Jesus' ministry and death?

It seems not. But what ever external forces were at work, they were lost on his fellow travellers. Isn't it amazing how we can experience something yet others experience it quite differently?

Did Saul somehow make the connection, or did God open his mind to understand that the followers of "The Way" were in fact the embodiment of the Christ? Saul's response to the blinding light was, "Who are you Lord?" The answer given was, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Somehow in Saul's mind, God made the connection that the believers are the embodiment of the crucified and risen Jesus. The eyes of Paul's spirit/understanding were open but physically he was without sight.

Now that is the first part of the story! Then comes a time of Saul's making sense of, getting a focus on, what he had seen and heard—and he does this within the companionship of the believers. We hear of an Ananias having a vision about Saul and going to him. What courage! What if it had been a trick to catch him?

What if an Ananias had not followed that prompting? What if the early believers had not included him? It's a reminder that we can block God's purposes by not wanting to welcome the stranger or to deal with the enemy, for that was Ananias and the early believers were doing.

This experience of living with the stranger is mentioned in the 2007 Lenten message of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Michel Sabbah: "The vocation to be leaven in the dough of Jesus' own hand requires that we stay in this land, even though life in other lands might be easier. The vocation to be leaven is a vocation to live the commandment of love in order to forgive, while at the same time demanding all the rights that have been lost, and in order to transform life into a sharing of goods and sacrifices. This sharing can make all of us, with all of our differences in religion and nationality, true builders of the new society that must arise in this Holy Land for all of us, Jews, Druze, Muslims and Christians."

Paul's letter to the Galatians tells us that after these initial steps of being received, restored, and baptised, and after spending time with the disciples, Paul went to Arabia for about three years. Possibly this was to understand and work through his experiences in relation to his training as a Pharisee.

Paul returned to Damascus and then had to escape before going to Jerusalem, where once again he was treated with suspicion, until Barnabas intervened and ensured his welcome.

The story I am trying to tell is that God comes to us, speaks to us, in the ordinary and the everyday, in surprising ways. (In today's Gospel story, it was in the familiar events of fishing and eating that Jesus was recognised.) But we need the company of each other, the company of our fellow believers, to make sense of, and bring into focus, the word of God. At the heart of it all is that willingness to welcome and trust and to listen.

So in the midst of this world's craziness and mayhem, in the journeys we take, in the people we meet, let us be open to what God has to say. Let us bring what God has to say into the company of believers, to share and discuss, so that we can put it into focus and find a deeper faith and understanding of God.