

**Christ, Resurrection, Grace: The Gospel of Paul.**  
**Easter 3, April 10, 2016**

Today we have the story of Paul's dramatic 'road to Damascus' experience.

The phrase has become embedded in our culture and language. We understand it to be an event or happening which is unexpected, dramatic, and has the consequence of a new way of living or understanding.

This is what happened to Paul. He had been persecuting the little, but growing, sect of believers in Jesus. He had been rounding them up and putting them in jail. He had stood and held the garments of those who were stoning Stephen, the deacon, now known to us as the first Christian martyr. He had approved of Stephen's death. On the road to Damascus he was on his way to persecute more Christians. He was carrying papers which gave him access to the city and permission to do this. Then it happened that he had the unexpected, totally unexpected, experience that left him blind for three days and totally changed his life.

The consequence of Paul's Damascus road experience is that Paul, the feared, learned, dogmatic, rigid, persecuting Pharisee, through his acceptance of Christ, helped build a new structure that possessed Jewish roots but that also opened its followers to the startling possibility of a universal community.

We occasionally read of a public figure having a 'Damascus road experience', but all of us, you and me, can have an experience like this ourselves. At the end of this sermon I have asked Linda to invite you to pause in quiet for a moment to reflect on a significant experience in your life – and the consequence of that experience. What did you do about it?

I had done some background reading for preaching today, which was pretty mundane as most of us know this story, and then I took down from my bookshelf this book, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism by Bishop John Shelby Spong. I wondered what he might have to say about Paul. I knew about Spong and I hoped he would spice up my sermon a bit.

Many of you will also know about Spong. He is now 84, a retired American bishop in the Episcopal Church, i.e. Anglican to us. He was ordained a priest in 1955 that is over 60 years ago, and consecrated bishop in 1976, 40 years ago. As well as doing all the duties of these roles and travelling around the world on speaking engagements, he has written 25 books, including a book which was published this year. How can anyone do all this! Is he like Paul? Driven to convey to the world what he sees as the true Christian message?

Spong acknowledges that his writings evoke great support and great condemnation simultaneously from differing segments of the Christian church.

He is very controversial, yet when I met him at St John's here in Canberra sometime in the mid 1990's, I was surprised to find a man who was so softly spoken. He had the manner of a holy modest man. But in 2001 Archbishop Peter Hollingworth banned him from speaking in the Brisbane diocese, in 2007 Archbishop Peter Jensen banned him from preaching at any churches in the Sydney diocese. By contrast in 2007 Archbishop Phillip Aspinall, the primate of Australia invited Spong to deliver two sermons at St John's Cathedral in Brisbane.

I invite you to read his writings if you want to know why many find him controversial. But for now I want to share with you a little of his writing on Paul.

Who was Christ for Paul?

I quote Spong directly, it would be a sacrilege for me to paraphrase him and pretend his words were mine. 'Christ was for Paul the presence and power of God that called him into authentic personhood.'

and

‘Paul believed that his personal unrighteousness had been replaced by the righteousness of God, and this gave him the hope of resurrection. He assured the Philippians that he had not obtained this gift or become perfect, but “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” (Phil 3:12)

What was the meaning of Grace for Paul?

‘What the Law could not do, the grace of love had done. Paul was justified. Paul was loved. While still in his sin, Paul was accepted. Nothing could separate him from the love of God – nothing; not tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, not even nakedness... Nothing could separate him from the love of God. Paul was now God’s elect. Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies, accepts, and loves. Who can condemn God’s elect? It is Christ that died to make love known.

Spong continues:

‘Because this Christ loves me, I can now love myself. That was the way the gospel dawned on Paul. Because Christ accepts me, I can now accept myself. I do not have to become righteous by keeping the law. God has declared me righteous as a gift of divine grace. God in Christ has reconciled me to God. Nothing will ever again separate me from this love ...’

Spong continues:

‘Who was Jesus for Paul? He was the reconciling agent for the grace of God. He was the image of the invisible God. He was the first born of all creation. He was a Jewish man who could be understood only in terms of the ultimate agent of God..... For Paul, Jesus the Christ was a special human life through whom God had uniquely acted and in whom God was uniquely present.....For two thousand years of Christian history this Pauline definition has been at the very core of the Christian experience. Grace was the love of God, an unconditional love that loved Paul just as he was.’

Spong closes this chapter with the words:

‘What is the Word of God for us underneath the words of Paul? It is that each of us, no matter how dark our shadows, or how condemned we are made to feel, are nonetheless the objects of the infinite and graceful love of God. Each of us is called to live in the wholeness of that love as one who has been embraced by the giver of infinite value. Accepting that divine valuation, we are to find the courage to be the self God has created us to be, the self we are inside the graceful gift of the righteousness of Christ. ‘

‘The ancient creed of the church that Jesus is Lord thus becomes a creed we modern folk can also shout with integrity, authenticity, and commitment. Moved by that creed we can begin anew the mission of the Christian church to proclaim love and grace to all who feel without love or apart from grace. And we will do so even when the proclamation of that gospel disturbs, convicts, and offends that institution that dares to call itself the church when it does not live out the meaning of being the accepting, loving, forgiving, affirming body of Christ.’

I’ve had this book for over 20 years and never read it. Now I am afraid. I’ve only read one chapter, if I read more will it change my life forever? I am afraid. And I am humbled by the eloquence and the truth of Spong’s writing. It has been a Damascus Road experience for me.

I invite us all now to pause for one minute to reflect on a Damascus road experience you have had – and what you did about it.

Amen