



Next week-end St Paul's is joining in with Archbishop Justin Welby's prayer initiative: 'Thy Kingdom Come'. From Thursday evening to Sunday morning, 26th to 28th May there will be space for 48 hours of continuous prayer for our world, our country and ourselves in a beautifully designed prayer room in the Church Hall, for the run-up to Pentecost. This week's story from Acts is about the impact one little known person can have on the course of history. **Acts 9: 10-22**

1. Ananias and Saul.

- All we know of Ananias is from these verses in Acts 9. [Not to be confused with another Ananias – Acts 5]
- He's an early convert to Jesus and, maybe while he was praying, Jesus called him by name in a vision and told him specifically to go to 'Judas' house on Straight Street'. God knew exactly where Saul (aka Paul) was staying.
- At this point Saul was a hard-line, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super Orthodox Pharisee who had been given authority by the High Priest to arrest as many Christians as he could find in Damascus. Ananias is fearful, going to meet Saul would mean arrest, if not death (**v.v. 13f**). But God reassures him and Ananias obeys.
- Ananias' courage is vindicated in a profoundly lovely moment when the two men meet and Ananias prays.

2. What can these men teach us?

- a) Each of us has a specific purpose. (Verses 10-12)
 - Ananias may have been thought of as a nobody, but to God he was a key somebody. God needed someone to commission Saul for his appointed work. Ananias obeyed, even though fearful for his own life.
 - Saul was destined to be used by God to bring the radical, transformative message that anyone – including Gentiles – can believe in salvation by faith in Jesus, the Son of God, and become a new creation in Him.
 - It can take a while to discern our 'specific purpose' but once we have done so, through prayer, we can live out Christ's message: there is a different way to be human among the people He is asking us to influence. The Anglican confirmation prayer affirms that, 'God has called you by name and made you His own'.
- b) We will encounter challenges. (Verses 13-16)
 - Ananias was fearful of what would happen to him: he knew Saul's murderous reputation.
 - Saul must have been fearful of permanently losing his sight, of what the Christian community would make of him, of what his former colleagues would do to him. Both men found that Christ had gone before them
 - Most of us have fears: spiders, the dark, ridicule, bullying, flying, right-hand turns into a busy road
 - James Martin, a 16th century Jesuit priest, learnt to overcome his fears of working in a hospital by directly confronting them, finding he could be free to give more love, to do more mission, all for the glory of God.
 - Fear will never have the final word. Perfect love drives out fear (**1 John 4: 18**)
- c) God has a plan. (Verses 17-19)
 - Ananias carries out his task with such grace, addressing him as 'Brother Saul'. Then he explains that 'the Jesus who met you on the road is the same Christ who sent me here'. One fearful man declares to another their oneness in Christ: persecutor and persecuted are united in their Saviour.
 - Then he places his hands on Saul's head and Saul's sight is restored and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. St Paul's amazing continental ministry begins with this profoundly deep moment when two men, once opposed, draw back together, in healing, restoration and reconciliation because of what Christ has done.

3. Our Call to Prayer.

- We have the opportunity to come to the prayer room this week-end and hear God's specific call on our lives.
- As we think about Paul in Straight Street, Damascus we can pray again for the Syrians caught up in conflict.
- We can pray for a vision of the way we fit into God's Master-plan for healing, restoration and reconciliation.

"O Spirit of God, we ask you to help orientate all our actions by your inspirations; carry them on by your gracious assistance, that every prayer and work of ours may always begin from you and through you be happily ended."

St Ignatius of Loyola.

Thoughts:

1. **Have we ever thought of ourselves as having a God-given job, or role in society that is specific to ourselves?**
2. **What challenges go with the particular areas in which we play a part for our community?**
3. **Can we share some of our fears with each other? Or explain how we have overcome them?**
4. **'Brother Saul' must have been wonderful words for Paul to hear from the lips of a Christian. Here was the arch-enemy of the church being welcomed as a brother, the dreaded fanatic received as a member of the family!** John Stott.