

The lectionary in the weeks after Easter takes us to events in the lives of the first Christians. Today an interrupted journey and a delayed arrival at the traveller's ultimate destination have lasting consequences. Saul was on his way to Damascus and we will never know for sure what happened. We might think we do, but between them Paul and Luke tell the story four times and each time it's different.

What do we know? We know that Saul, to use the Hebraic version of his birth-name, though born in Tarsus had come to Jerusalem with his parents while still young.

We know that he had sat at the feet of the great Jewish teacher Gamaliel by whose influence he had become a member of the strict sect known as Pharisees.

We surmise that he had never met Jesus and did not know what Jesus looked like, and in his later life Saul showed very little interest in the details of Jesus' life.

We know that not long after Jesus' death, probably only weeks rather than months after, Luke reports that Saul was instrumental in the stoning of Stephen, Christianity's first martyr.

We know that Saul took a leading part in hunting out adherents of the new Christian religion and he later admitted that as a result of his detective work many Christians had been imprisoned, interrogated and killed.

We know that Saul was anxious to halt the spread of Christianity to other major centres of Jewish settlement and that that is why he travelled to Damascus: he had a special warrant to continue his heresy hunt there. But something happened on the way. A literally blinding revelation caused him to turn around and join the sect he had so far so savagely persecuted.

What could have caused such a volte-face? Consistently Saul claimed that his journey was interrupted by an encounter with Christ. It was Jesus's voice, rather than God's, that Saul

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<sup>1</sup> The title of a verse-play by Christopher Fry

claimed to hear and the New Testament lists this as the last of the resurrection appearances of the risen Lord. What's important is that in all this Luke is constantly driving home the idea that the massive change of direction among the early Christians that Saul brought about was instigated by Christ himself. It was Christ who met Saul. It was Christ who led Saul to take the Christian faith outside the Jewish world into all the world. It was Christ who, in due course, made Saul Christianity's most influential advocate.

But, still we ask, what happened? Everything went light and everything went dark. A light from heaven flashed all around him, presumably casting everything into brightness. Yet Saul could not see. All went dark for him; he could see nothing.

This reminds me of Henry Vaughan's reflection on the story of Nicodemus meeting Jesus by night, in which the poet says there is in God a "deep but dazzling darkness." Vaughan suggests this because Nicodemus came to know God by night; when all around him was dark he saw God, but what he saw could not be plain because our vision is not clear.

Now, in telling of Saul's interrupted journey, Luke plays on the theme of light in a similar way. The blinding light plunged Saul into darkness; it also lit up his soul and enlightened his mind. He saw the light but then needed to be led by the hand. Natural light is never the same twice; the sun and cloud cast their shadows over the mountains and valleys turning them purple, green, brown and red as they play over the hillsides at the dawn of the day, the height of the day and the close of the day. Dawn, daylight and dusk are beautiful in the spring time of the year. In this Easter season, this joyful Eastertide, as we emerge from the grey light of winter, resurrection light brightens our path.

We should note, though, that the story of Saul's conversion from heresy hunter to faithful follower bothers some Christians today. Some think, "Why have I had no Damascus Road experience?" Why am I not as strongly convinced by a dramatic and individual conversion as Saul was?

It's unfortunate that a lot of preaching on this passage has been an evangelical quest for dramatic conversions from miserable sinner to glorious saint, because this has left many Christians feeling inadequate. Let's not forget that there are as many ways to become Christian as there are people. The range of ways by which people come to Christ is endless. Some are almost indiscernible, only a few are as radical as Saul's;

some are small steps at a time, only a few are giant leaps.

Most take a lifetime, not a momentary blinding light. None of us should expect our journey to God to be replicated by others; and none of us should expect our journey to be a replica of Saul's. God respects our individuality as we draw nearer to God. There's our first lesson in discipleship from this passage: be content with how you experience God.

There's a second lesson also. Paul, as he is now more familiarly known by the Greek version of his name, teaches us the value of U-turns. Changing your mind is good. Being ready to admit you are wrong and revise your opinions is not a sign of weakness or lack of conviction but a Christian thing to do. It is the way we learn and keep on growing. This is because our perception can never be complete. Our understanding of ourselves, of others, of life around us and of God is always restricted, but always developing and growing. No all-illuminating light reveals all things to us; none of us knows everything. Today we hold our annual church meeting, and when we think of our church life in church meetings, none of us has full understanding of the circumstances we live in and we don't know what the future holds. Rather, we make our way through the dark,

what the psalmist called a valley of shadows,  
what Bunyan called a slough of despond,  
what Newman called the encircling gloom,  
learning as we go that the dark is light enough.

The town I was brought up in had a proud mining heritage and it is where the largest mining disaster in Britain occurred. In 1909, 168 men and boys lost their lives when two underground explosions occurred. Amazingly 26 survived, trapped

underground. While awaiting rescue they sang hymns. It is recorded that they sang a hymn written in 1833 by John Henry Newman. Its words come to mind when I think of the Damascus Road, our journey in life and our road to God.

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,  
Lead Thou me on!  
The night is dark, and I am far from home,  
Lead Thou me on!  
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou  
Shouldst lead me on;  
I loved to choose and see my path; but now  
Lead Thou me on!  
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,  
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still  
Will lead me on.  
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till  
The night is gone,  
And with the morn those angel faces smile,  
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!

Meantime, along the narrow rugged path,  
Thyself hast trod,  
Lead, Saviour, lead me home in childlike faith,  
Home to my God.  
To rest forever after earthly strife  
In the calm light of everlasting life.

We will never know precisely what happened to Paul on his way to Damascus, but we live in a world which has been shaped by the results of whatever happened. We live in its aftermath. So may your journey through this world and your life of Christian discipleship be at least certain in its direction,  
may you find that the dark is light enough  
and may the road ahead be lit by God's Spirit.