

Paul (Acts 9:1-19)

Resurrection people (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 13 April 2008

In what has to be one of the best films ever, one of the main characters reacts to God's sudden and unexpected call on his life by starting a trail of mayhem and chaos that culminates in a massive car chase which involved the destruction of over 30 police cars and a Ford full of Illinois nazis being dropped from a plane. I'm talking of course about the radical change in Jake Blues from the Blues Brothers film and his mission from the Lord to get \$5,000 for the Blessed Helen of the Holy Shroud Orphanage. I'm not sure if that makes Jake a real resurrection person but the film is well worth watching anyway - particularly if you like real Blues, R&B, Motown or even good ole country music.

Today's reading from Luke's gospel tells the story of another radical conversion. It's better known that Jake blues and unlike the Blues Brothers, it's part of a carefully researched report not a highly amusing film. We're concluding our short series on resurrection people today by

looking at Luke's account of the conversion of Saul who would become St Paul, the most famous pastor, theologian and church planter of the whole Bible. In fact the phrase a Damascus Road experience has become part of the English language to describe a radical change in someone's life.

Let's listen to that reading now:

Acts 9:1-19 p1102

So what is our reading about? It's about God's call on Saul. It's about his call on Saul to Paul. Not the call on all to Paul but the call on Saul to Paul. But the call on Saul to Paul is a call for all, too...

Right, now I hope that's clear for everyone. Any questions?

Today's reading really is about God's call. And it is about God's call on Saul, about his call on Paul to follow Jesus and to become a resurrection person, like the ones we've been hearing about over the last couple of weeks.

Of course God's call on Saul - don't worry, I'm not going to go through the

whole thing again - God's call on Saul was unique. It was unique because Saul was unique: He was well educated having studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He seems to have come from a good family and he certainly came from a wealthy town. Paul was a really religious man. He was a good Jew, in fact he was about as good a Jew as a Jew could be: He later wrote about himself "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Php 3:5-6).

He's the sort of good, clean-living, Torah-quoting Jew that other Jews would have looked up to. And many would probably have envied him because he was a Roman citizen, too. All in all Saul was about as good as he could be in the eyes of the people he lived with. Yet when we meet him in this reading Saul is like a wild beast dying to break out and savage as many Christians as he can. Saul is living in the time after the resurrection but he is not a resurrection person. Saul was unique. On one level, the way God

called Saul was exceptional: It was unique and unrepeatable. It was unique because it was God's call to Saul.

So what has that got to do with us here today, almost 2,000 years after the event Luke describes? What does our reading tell us about God's call? It tells us about hearing God's call and it tells us about heading / heeding PPT God's call.

Have you ever looked at someone else's ears? They're different from yours. Their ears are unique and your ears are unique. Our ears are unique. We are unique. We all have different skills, talents and memories. God's call on Saul was unique because Saul was unique. God knows that and the Bible tells us that he knew us even in our mother's wombs. God met Saul on that road in the way which was right for Saul. It was sudden and it was extreme but it was right for Saul. The way God met me was sudden and unexpected. I know the day and the date and the time. The way he met Margit was different. She doesn't have a single before and after moment but that doesn't mean what happened to me was superior or that she never really met God. God knows how

strong her faith is and I have seen how strong her faith is and how much she has helped me. God wants to meet each person in the way which is right for him or her. If you have already accepted Jesus Christ, then you'll know what I mean. If you haven't, then I hope what you hear today will encourage you to turn to him and to become a resurrection person, too.

Let's start with hearing God's call. There are 2 principles at work here: Principle 1: God is sovereign and he can choose whoever he wants and it's not always easy to understand why he chooses the people he does choose - particularly when those choices involve persons who are chosen to do the work of God. Saul joins a long list of reprobates (Jacob), murderers (Moses), and odd characters whom God has chosen as vessels for God's work. I'd like to add my name to that list, too. That's what grace means. Jesus once said to his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16).

Principle 2. God doesn't force himself on people. Jesus appeared to Saul and spoke to him but he didn't break him or crush his personality. Jesus humbled Saul, so

that he fell to the ground, but he didn't violate Saul's personality. He didn't make Saul any less Saul than he had been before. He didn't make Saul into a robot who had to do things in a kind of hypnotic trance. In fact if you look carefully you'll see how Jesus appeals directly to Saul's conscious mind, to his reason and to his conscience by asking a simple question, 'Why do you persecute me?' That's how he started to show him why what he was doing was wrong, why it was foolish and why it was evil. Becoming a Christian doesn't bypass our brains: It transforms them. PPT No force - just transformation

That's what it means to hear God's call. Now, what about heeding God's call? Again our reading shows us some very important principles:

Principle 3: God calls people into action. v6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." v18 Saul gets up, eats and is baptised. Sorry gets up, gets baptized and then eats - I'm not sure I'd have done it that order! But there's more to it than that. Saul's action meant a

public statement that he was now a follower of the one he had been persecuting. Saul had become a real resurrection person. When God calls people, they change on the outside as well as on the inside. For Paul that change was sudden and rapid. For some people here today it was, too. For others, the change was slower and more gentle but if God has called you there will have been a noticeable change in your life. Paul would later write that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.

But God also calls people who are already new creations, people who are already Christians to action: we can't actually get to people without tripping over Ananias. This is Ananias' one and only appearance in the Bible but it is massively important. He's someone else who heard God's call - in an unexpected way and acted on it. All we know about him is that he was a Christian who stayed in Damascus even though Saul was coming to get him. All we know about him is that he stayed and he prayed. He stayed and he prayed and when he God's voice he did what God told him to do - even though it's clear he didn't really want to. But

that's what he did and through his hands God launched the ministry of Paul the apostle into the world. If you are already a Christian, then Ananias' story should be a great encouragement to do what he did: To stay close to God, to pray and listen to him and when he speaks to do what he tells you to do. Resurrection people are not only "heroes" of the faith like Peter or Philip but also ordinary folk like Ananias.

Principle 3: God calls people into action. But God doesn't only call people to do things. Part of his call is also to pray:

Principle 4: When God calls people he calls them to prayer. He wants to communicate with them. The one who made the heavens and the earth wants to talk to people like you and me. Most commentators think Ananias is praying when God speaks to him through the vision in v1 onwards and v11 tells us that that's what Saul is certainly doing:

The Lord told [him] Ananias, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he

is praying.

The privilege of communicating with the creator through prayer is part of God's call. But there's more. Listen to what Ananias must tell Paul about his future v15 onwards:

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Principle 5: God calls people to glory v15 but also to suffering v16. That's what Jesus life was like and as followers of Jesus, Christians should expect the same.

Principle 6: When God calls people he calls them into fellowship with other Christians: Look at v17 The first things Ananias actually says to Paul is: Brother Saul. God doesn't call people to be freelance Christians: he calls them into fellowship with himself and with his family. He calls them to be part of his body, and his body is wherever 2 or 3 are

gathered together in his name because his body is the church.

Hearing and heeding God's call:

- Principle 1 God is sovereign
- Principle 2 Transformation not violation
- Principle 3 Action
- Principle 4 Prayer
- Principle 5 Glory and suffering through
- Principle 6 Fellowship

God's call should lead you into all of these. It doesn't matter whether the call knocks you off your horse or whether it rocks you to sleep when you hear it. It doesn't matter whether it is a sudden single experience or a more gradual process taking weeks, months or even years. God's call should lead you to all. And the change may well be visible to others before you notice it yourself. When people turn to Christ and become resurrection people, their lives should start showing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Ga 5:22-23). The process of hearing God's call will be different for each person because we are all unique but the product should be the

same, a life changed, transformed. That's what it meant for Thomas to become a resurrection person, his life was changed, transformed; that's what it meant for Peter to become a resurrection person, his life was changed, transformed; That's what it meant for Saul to become a resurrection person his life was changed, transformed; and that's what it will mean when you become a resurrection person. Your life will be changed, transformed for all to see as you become more and more like the one who called you. Your conversion experience may not be as radical as Saul's but the result will be just as radical because when anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. Let's pray: