

## Bennochy church 10th April 2016

If you are a politician, one of the things you will never admit to, is having to make a U turn on some piece of policy. They will bring the political spin doctor who will tell you, 'we've been listening'. Instead of admitting they are under pressure because an unpopular or badly thought out policy, they will want to take the credit for any change of direction. The other tactic is to hide bad news behind something else that is happening or, to try and change the agenda, by talking about something else. You have seen this happen. A politician is interviewed, and if they find themselves in difficulty, they won't answer the question, but they tell you, over and over again, what they want wish you to hear; even if it has nothing to do with the original question!

For the religious authorities the conversion of Saul the rabbi, was a disaster. Their leading henchmen defects and makes the greatest ever U turn in history. I know that is a big claim, but imagine a world where Saul continued to persecute the followers of Jesus. Listen to the kind of person he was. *Saul kept up his violent threats of murder against the followers of the Lord.*

Radovan Karadzic was recently found guilty at the International criminal court at the Hague on charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity and sentenced to 40 years in prison. Is it taking the analogy too far to say, that if there had been such a court in Saul's day, he might have have found

himself in the dock, for crimes against humanity? That is the level and the depth of his persecution he carried out against the followers of Jesus. He was a radical, a zealot, a fanatic. No one was more conscientious in their endeavour to live up to the demands of the Jewish law upon their lives, than he was. No one was more proud of their Jewish ancestry and of the heritage of Israel, than he was.

The reason he was on his way to Damascus was to continue these acts of persecution. Not content with what he was doing in Jerusalem, he now pursues those who have fled persecution. He was determined to root out this poisonous new heresy. For Galilean fishermen to claim this Jesus as Messiah was a blasphemous affront to the law of God, as delivered through Moses to his people. Armed with letters of introduction from the High Priest, he is off to Damascus to arrest men and women and bring them back to Jerusalem. In those days there is no Red Cross or Amnesty International. Would anyone know what was happening? Would these people ever be seen again? probably not! That was the reality of living as a follower of Jesus and that is the kind of person, Saul was.

I wonder if the religious authorities had a theological spin doctor to help them massage the story a bit, and minimise the damage that this was going to do. "*We suspected this would happened*" and Saul would be investigated. The 'theological dirty tricks' department of the Sanhedrin would get involved; his

family interrogated, his parchments intercepted and his close friends would be followed. He would be shown up in a bad light, his reputation trashed as a traitor, and as someone not to be trusted. On my part this is pure speculation!

The event is described as a dramatic encounter between Saul and Jesus. *The Damascus road experience*. How often have we used that phrase. We know the essence of the story. It is all about a change in someone's life. Think about this, the more extreme the circumstances, the more dramatic the change. From Saul, persecutor of the people of the Way, to Paul, the man who travelled the known world to share the story of Jesus. It is this person, who Saul encounters on the Damascus road. This is where it all began. And if you think about it, the bible would be a lot smaller without Paul and the world would be a very different place. Has anyone done more to spread Christianity than Paul?

The detail of the story is dramatic. Light, symbolising the glory of God, and the voice of Jesus. Think of echoes travelling through history of other such dramatic encounters. Moses encounters God in a burning bush and is told, you are the man, to lead God's people out of Egypt. Samuel hears the voice of God calling his name; Ezekiel's vision is a dramatic picture of a valley of dry bones; and Isaiah is in the temple, his lips are touched with burning coals and he is asked, *whom shall I send* and he answered, *send me*.

In his encounter with God, Saul is no doubt confused and filled with fear, and he wants to know, who is this, who meets him on the way. He says, *who are you, Lord or sir*. He is not sure.

It is important to know who you are meeting. It gives you sense of control over what is happening. Moses wanted to know God's name and was told my name is "I am". Not altogether helpful! What does that mean? Saul is here meeting "I am". I am, the way the truth and the life. I am, the resurrection and the life. I am, the gate. I am, the bread of life. It is no coincidence that the writer of John's gospel attributes these words to Jesus. 'I am' says to Saul, *"I am Jesus, whom you persecute"*. In persecuting these people, you persecute me. Saul's journey continues, but a change in direction has been made and from that point on in his life, Saul would follow the true way of God. We might speculate that God had been working on Saul prior to his Damascus Road experience, but this is the moment God breaks through.

When did we first encounter God and how would we describe it? I suspect the dramatic nature of Saul's encounter with Jesus would 'Trump' ours. Maybe not the best phrase to use! But none of us would be here, if we had not had our own Damascus meeting with 'I am'.

Our journeys are different. Our encounters with God, unique. But at some moment in time we have been stopped in our tracks by God and our lives changed. Maybe memory has dulled the dramatic or God's encounter was one of a growing

awareness over many years and we are now struggling to recall, that moment our lives changed.

Maybe our spiritual memories need to be reenergised and taken back to the point of realisation, that 'I am', spoke to us, and we answered the question, *whom shall I send*, and we answered, *I am here, send me*. Amen.