

God knows me. God loves me.

A sermon prepared by Revd Joanna Coney for the Third Sunday of Epiphany 24 January 2021
Refs: Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Acts 9: 1-22; Matthew 19: 27-end

Last week we heard something about God's call to us and this week we remember one in particular - the conversion of St Paul. A familiar story to most of us. We hear again about Saul - a ruthless persecutor of Christ's followers - who was ravaging the church by entering house after house dragging off both men and women who were new Christians, and committing them to prison. And then he goes on his journey to Damascus to root out yet more Christians and to take them bound back to Jerusalem for punishment. But then he was suddenly struck down, blinded and heard a voice saying to him, "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting*" and he hears his call. And then after being cared for for a while by Ananias, he changes completely putting all his energy into spreading the Word of God rather than punishing it. And even his name was changed – Saul became Paul.

So – to look at this story a bit more closely – what is happening? Paul was on the wrong path He must have known quite a lot about these Christians he was persecuting. After all his whole being had been concentrated on seeking them out and destroying them. So, what they believed was familiar to him. Did he have an unacknowledged suspicion that what they believed might be true? That there was something so special and mind-blowing about this Jesus? We don't know. But if he did - then at first, he fought it with the whole heartedness that he put into all he did –and sought them out to extinguish them in any way he could.

But God had other plans for him and struck him down blind. He could not see either physically or in understanding. So maybe he needed such a dramatic event to show him just how blind – in every respect he was being.

But then he was led by the hand to Ananias. Being led by someone else was probably something alien to him and something he was in no way used to – but he was obedient, and he went. He had always been a leader –and was now being led. And he was forced to submit to someone else guiding him, caring for him and directing where he was to go and why. Someone to help him discern the reality of his call and to help and support him in all that was happening to him. He was helpless and dependant on someone else and indeed also now on the God who was calling him.

And so, he was taken in by Ananias who had been told by God to go and care for Saul, lay hands on him and restore not only his physical sight but his whole outlook on life. So, he became a new person. He changed his name from Saul the persecutor – to Paul the evangelist. But true to his character, once he accepted that he was called by God to accept such a complete turnaround or metanoia he not only embraced it but threw himself into it utterly and wholeheartedly. And he dedicated the rest of his life taking the good news of Christ to others.

He travelled widely. He preached to all he came across both in person and then also in his prolific writings to the new emerging Christian churches. A dramatic conversion – and a wholehearted one.

Paul was called. He turned his whole life and beliefs inside out and became completely and utterly committed to Christ and, as we know, spent the rest of his life spreading the joy of Christianity in many places all around the Mediterranean. And he accepted the high cost of this new life and of spreading the Word willingly – in much travelling, personal suffering, tempest, imprisonments, sickness, betrayal and finally death.

So, Paul accepted that his vocation, his calling from God, was something he could not ignore. It was just too powerful to resist. And we too all have this calling from God, maybe not as dramatically as Paul, but there none-the-less. For Paul it is a definite cataclysmic event that results in a definite change of direction. For others, and I guess for most people, it is an accumulation of apparently minor incidents

that gently shepherds them in a particular direction. And this week's readings tell us of this. We read that Jeremiah heard God saying to him,

*"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you
Before you were born, I consecrated you
Go where I send you.
Speak the words I give you
And do not be afraid – I am with you".*

Then in our Gospel from Matthew we hear the disciples say to Jesus – "We have answered your call – we have left everything and followed you – what more do you want? And what do we get out of this?". And Jesus replies that they will receive a hundred-fold and eternal life with him.

So for both Jeremiah and the disciples it was a clear cut call – but for us it is so often quite the opposite. We are all called, certainly, we are all called to love God, serve one another and live our lives as echoes of Christ's. But the detail of **how** we are called to **do** this is often less clear. God never forces us – he invites us. And it is up to us entirely as to how we respond – to say yes or to say no to God. So maybe this morning readings invite us afresh to think about what it is that God is asking of us – what is God calling each of us to be and do? God claims us for himself at our Baptism – and in response we have to listen and learn how it is he wants us to use this gift of life and of love. Discerning this is not always easy and can be a long and confusing path, a path on which, as Paul needed Ananias, we need the help and advice of others to guide and support us.

We know that Paul urged the Christians in Ephesus – and the same applies to us - "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called and enabled at our Baptism."

This is the primary and on-going call to every one of us - to love God above all things and to become active and faithful members of the body of Christ – the Church.

But there is also the other kind of call – the burning conviction that we are supposed to be doing something special and distinctive for God, as was Paul. In order to build up the body of Christ in the world we may feel impelled to public ministry – to caring for the sick - to working with children – to work with the suffering and homeless –and many many other walks of life. For each of us, where our service for God is concerned, it is often a case of watching and being able to see a need and, using the skills He has given us, responding to it wholeheartedly and appropriately.

Maybe the events of this past year and the lockdowns we have experienced and are still experiencing, give us the opportunity to look again at how we are living our lives and to re-examine in prayer the direction of our lives, and to recalibrate where we are and in what direction we are going. A good way of approaching this is perhaps repeating these words over and over again, "*God knows me. God loves me. And God has a use for me – today and every day.*"

And to ponder words Anthony Bloom once said (he puts it so much better than I can)

*"Conversion means a turn – a change of direction of things –
a means of spending our lives, NOT in looking in all directions
and thus turning away from a great many things which we value solely because they were
pleasant or expedient for us . But looking in just one direction only.
The first impact of conversion is to modify our sense of values.
God being at the centre of all, everything acquires a new position and a new depth
For all that is God's, all that belongs to Him, is positive and always very real."*

Paul knew this, he accepted his call without question – a call that changed his life for ever. How do we, how can we, follow his example?

Amen