

The Road to Damascus

Acts 9:1-6; John 21:1-19

I have stood on the Golan Heights looking down on to the road that leads to Damascus. The road was shrouded in dust, and over that benighted city acrid smoke hung. It was a place of death and defiance, and not much has changed since I looked down on it over a year ago. The simmering discontentment in the Middle East, Arab against Arab, Israel against Palestinian, Shia against Sunni has many smoke-shrouded routes, and one of the darkest is the Road to Damascus. It is ironic given its almost legendary status in the Christian world as a scene of blazing light and revelation.

What we have in the Book of Acts is Luke's sparse account of what happened to Paul on the Road to Damascus; these are not the words of Paul himself. It is set in the context of other conversions that Luke was describing: Philip and the Ethiopian, and Peter and the Roman Centurion Cornelius. There were many roads being travelled in those early days of Christianity. In all that travelling that is why the early Church was known as 'The Way'. Just as there were many roads being travelled by many people, fleeing persecution and witnessing to their faith in Jesus on the way, so there were many people have their own Road to Damascus experiences. Experiences where hearts and minds, bodies and souls, prejudices and preconceptions were turned upside down by the experience of Jesus and what He taught.

The emphasis in the Road to Damascus story is clearly on Paul, that hard-hearted, hard-minded Pharisee on his way along the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, breathing threats and murder against the followers of Jesus. He'd been part of the senior Pharisees who had agreed to the stoning of the Deacon, Stephen. He had heard that another nest of Jesus-followers had escaped to Damascus, so went off in pursuit of them. The American novelist Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."

But the story is in truth wider than Paul. Many others were on the road of conversion, and maybe some of them also had to be knocked off their horses too, such was the dramatic explosion caused by Paul's conversion.

After Paul's blinding, whatever that was, he was taken to the house of Ananias, a follower of Jesus. Paul had been blind for three days, a significant number. But why take this Christian-hater to the house of a Christian? They must have been terrified. But they too were transformed into caring, compassionate, welcoming people. They were in Damascus but they might as well have been on the road and in the blazing light. They too were converted, and learned to love their enemy, just as Jesus had taught a few years ago.

As I read and re-read this passage, I am struck not only by the dramatic change in Paul; but also by the equally dramatic change in the frightened community of believers in Damascus. They encountered Jesus too, and they encountered him in their erstwhile persecutor, the man known as Saul (his Hebrew name) who later used Paul (his Latin name). And when that encounter happened, transformation took place.

Do not be dazzled by the light to the Road to Damascus and think that everything changed overnight once and for all. We read later on in Acts of the Christian family continuing to struggle with Paul's transformation. Could someone like him really be a convert? We also know from Paul himself that though there was this one, blinding moment, it took him three years to grow into his faith. He tells us in his letter to the Galatians. Yes, there was a decisive moment, but there was work needing to be done as the transformation in his life evolved. In truth, all Christian life, for Paul, for us, is about that transforming evolution works its way in us through the years. Scales are constantly falling from our eyes as understanding comes.

In our country today, there is a need for a Road to Damascus experience. I make no bones about my Remainer views, but whether you are a Remainer or a Brexiter, as we travel down this storm-battered, fog-bound road, is this really what we want for our country? As we now see the pitfalls and unintended consequences, and as we also must remember the absolute problems of an as yet unreformed European bureaucracy, what might a Road to Damascus experience

reveal to our nation, and to Europe, today; and how might it challenge us to do politics differently?

The world has been enchanted, and challenged, by the Swedish teenager Greta Thuneberg and David Attenborough with their serious warnings about the ecological future of our planet. The threat of climate change can surely now only be denied by those of a flat-earth mentality as we all need to consider and then act on what we as individuals, as nations, as a world, will do about the care of Creation. What are our responses to the challenge of sustainable food production that doesn't decimate forests; of travel that doesn't pollute the streets we walk along, and the skies above our heads; the industries that make products we create a market for, but at a considerable ecological cost; and the waste that is produced in plastic, slowly drowning sea and land. It is not simply one or two cranky individuals walking down the climate changing Road to Damascus, it is the whole world. What might a Road to Damascus experience require of us in the way we relate to our planet, and how we care for it and the generations to come?

It should come as no surprise that the Church constantly travels along the Road to Damascus. The blazing light of God's transformation continually bursts out to encourage, challenge and sometimes annoy people of faith to this day. Think of the changes there have been in the last fifty years in the place of women, on attitudes to same-sex relationships, and on the role of children. Not all are in agreement with the direction travelled, but for my part all I can see is blessing as scales have fallen from eyes and hearts. To see all God's children, and to welcome them, has involved significant movement on many sides, and some would argue that we are not there yet. But there are many roads to Damascus, and at this year's General Assembly proposals about the future of the way the Church of Scotland governs itself and makes decisions, what the headquarters at 121 George Street might become, what Presbyteries, the regional governance of our Church, and Kirk Sessions and congregations might need to plan into the future will come up for debate. The Church last year called for radical action, and in many ways what is to be debated will be very radical. Too radical for some, not radical enough for others. And it matters for this is no indulgent navel-gazing exercise, this is about determining

the priorities, vision, finance, staffing and future of the Church. Believe me, it matters, and the forthcoming Assembly is only the beginning of this particular Road to Damascus journey. There may be a whiff of revolution, but underneath is the steady movement of evolution. In this C21st what is God calling God's Church to be? Here in this Church, with a need for an increase in giving to sustain and develop our work, with changes in the fabric of our sanctuary, with ideas about how we communicate our faith amongst ourselves, with our young people, with the community beyond these walls, what is God calling God's Church in Morningside to be? We too, willingly or not, are on that metaphorical Road to Damascus. What scales need to fall from our eyes? What light do we need to see? What attitude to friend and enemy, insider and outsider, needs to be changed within us as we puzzle out for ourselves what it means to be God's Church here – with radical hospitality and welcome, with worship and learning, with how we care for the needs of the lonely and the vulnerable, the frightened and the frustrated?

The Road to Damascus story is about God opening eyes. Opening Paul's eyes. Opening the eyes of Ananias and the frightened Christians in Damascus who found they were welcoming an enemy into their midst. Opening the Jerusalem churches eyes to a ministry that went beyond the children of Israel to the children of the world. That is some road!

Its journey continues today as the implications of God opening eyes touches politics, economics, science, culture and social mores. The story and experience of Jesus opens eyes to see the new reality created by His life, death and resurrection.

The light might be blinding at first, but our eyes adjust, and we find, please God, a new way of seeing. Religious experience is not a private affair. It is to be shared with the world, so that the world, too, might see, believe, and be transformed.

The Road to Damascus, when you step out of your pew, when I step down from the pulpit, we're on the way. And we are on the way with God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen