

## Road to Damascus

*Acts 9:1-20*

Confession is good for the soul, they say. So, if you're sitting comfortably, I need to get something off my chest.

Ready? I have never seen a single Star Wars film. Not a single one of the 349 films that have been made. Please don't judge me.

However I know that today's date is one that gets Star Wars fans unnaturally excited. So, if you're a Star Wars fan, 'May the fourth be with you.' Not only do you need to have seen one of the Star Wars films, you also have to have developed a bit of a lisp. May the Fourth be with you.

I Googled it and discovered that, "*May the Force be with you*," was a phrase used to wish an individual or group good luck or good will. The phrase was often used as individuals parted ways or in the face of an impending challenge.

I wonder what force Saul, who later on became Paul, thought went with him as he travelled from Jerusalem to Damascus? He was, 'still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord', as he had been involved in the murder of the deacon Stephen who had been falsely accused of blasphemy and was killed by a religious mob. Saul had watched this and consented to the murder. Saul, driven by hatred and the desire to persecute, was sent from Jerusalem to persecute people who belonged to 'The Way' (an early description of Christians). Notice how within months of the crucifixion/resurrection events surrounding Jesus, His followers were already on the move and talking about Him in the synagogues. Remember, Jesus, and His first followers, were Jews.

What motivates a person to breathe threats and murder? Could it be fear? Fear is a tremendous motivator. Fear does terrible things to society. Fear is what creeps up on us unawares when illness

strikes, or bereavement comes close, or a job falls through, or a relationship ends, or egos clash over who is to be more important and who will be side-lined. When fear comes into the world of politics, when barriers are raised and respectful dialogue is reduced to sloganeering and shouting and not listening, and the making of unproven accusations, then communities, countries and the world is damaged, alongside individuals. The rise of extremism on the far right and the far left of politics is an existential threat to justice, democracy and decency in this and every country. The rise of exceptionalism in churches and faith communities, believing that their way and only their way is the right way to the exclusion of all else, leads to islands of theological bigotry and judgementalism under the guise of being 'all for Jesus', when it is often anything but that. Breathing threats and verbal murder, excluding those who do want to find a place within broad and generous communities, is unbiblical, and unchristian. We are frequently told to watch our mouths and what we say; and watch our actions and how they are perceived by others.

We might not be literally the same as Saul 'breathing threats and murder' against our opponents. But we have all been on wrong paths and wrong roads that have been injurious to ourselves and others. We have all been headstrong and stubborn, blinded by our own ambition, selfish to meet our own needs, caught in self-regarding behaviours and oblivious of the true cost to others, and to ourselves. We have been close-minded. We have stubbornly refused to look, or listen, or understand.

That was the road from Jerusalem to Damascus that Saul was on. Does that road run through Morningside, or wherever you have made your home? Are you on that road?

Which is why this story of Saul is important and relevant to us today. What road are you on in your life? What baggage, emotional, attitudinal, spiritual are you carrying with you? Is it a help to you, or is it a hindrance? Where do you want to get to, and how is that journey working out?

Saul sets out, enraged and vindictive. Damascus was an important Syrian city about 135 miles north of Jerusalem and a leading commercial centre of the Roman Empire. A large population of Jews lived there, and amongst them now were some early Christians. Saul set out to sort them out and bring them back to Jerusalem for judgement.

On that road, something happened. I wonder how many Christian experiences take place on roads, as people travel, like the Road to Emmaus; as Jesus walked and encountered blind Bartimaeus. Is that why the first Christians called themselves, 'The Way', after Jesus' saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Faith sometimes requires us to sit still and be peaceful; faith sometimes requires us to get up and to move onwards. On the road to Damascus something happened to Saul. A bright shining light, not only stopped Saul in his tracks but knocked off his feet. It changed him from someone who breathed threats and murder to someone who was taken by the hand and taken in by the very people he had planned to persecute.

The Road to Damascus experience is often misunderstood. It is not a Grade A, Gold Star, First Class conversion. If you haven't had that kind of experience in your faith journey you are not a lesser Christian. In fact, it didn't happen like that to Paul. He had to be led by the hand; he had to be taken in and ministered to by Ananias, a frightened but faithful Christian; and later by Barnabas. It took days, months, years as Paul converted.

Which is the way it is for all of us when faith comes knocking at the door of our lives. We might be able to date the time and place and venue. But whether or not that happened to you it still takes that long slow burn of realisation and practice and experience and commitment. Alongside brighter moments and darker moments, when your belief seems utterly clear, or utterly confused, and shows that you are still open to experience and sensation and learning and renewing, and retracing steps, and moving onwards. Different people come to God in different ways, and walk

with God in different ways, and follow God in different ways. And that's all right. God is in the business of changing lives steadily. Many of us walk around blind at times. God wants us to see. God wants us to experience something like scales falling from our eyes. It's rarely a one-off experience; it's more like a process. We learn to see, we learn to look, we learn to listen, we learn to understand, and we learn to follow. On the Road to Damascus that's what happened to Paul. The light came, and Saul changed to Paul, and a whole new road opened up before him.

If that has happened to you, in a dramatic way, or maybe more likely a gentler way, what was the light that came to you? What caused you to see reality differently, so much so that you began to change the way you lived, and continued changing? The light still comes to us, blinding and gradual - so what was it that got through to you? A risk-taking friend or partner or child or colleague who had the honesty to speak to you and help you see that things could be different? That was Ananias' role in the Paul story. Sometimes it's the words of a book we read, or a programme we see, or music we hear. Or a recognition of the vacancy in our own souls in the middle of the night, or on a mountaintop, or by a seashore, or on a busy street that finally convinces us that we're heading the wrong way, or with the wrong attitude, and things need to change, and can change, and will change. That time when our ability is matched by our willingness to effect the change of direction and take a different route. The light turns on not *outwith* our lives, but *within* our lives. And we find the willingness to take the risk of seeing anew, and that makes the turnaround possible. We stood at a crossroads. We had a choice. We could have launched forth blindly or tarried. We tarried, and that made all the difference.<sup>i</sup> God wasn't done with Paul on the Road to Damascus. And God isn't done with us yet either. It's not going to be all in a moment, it will take time, and the scales will fall from our eyes, and gradually we see, and understand, and accept, and believe.

There will be some here at that crucial point in life, or nearing one. Are you resisting; are you needing help?

Think of little Georgia, baptised today. How she will be helped through life to grow and learn and see? Our faith and life experiences are not a private affair. Whatever shape or form it takes it is for spreading the good news and building up the Church, moving us on.

I might never have seen a Star Wars film, but this I can say, wherever and however you go, may the force go with you!

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

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> *Stephen D Jones, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2, p407*