

Why do you delay? Get up, be baptised and have your sins washed away!

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I wonder if you are a fan of hearing and telling stories? More crucially for us today, are we excited to hear and share stories about God? How He moves in our lives and transforms us?

Our reading from Acts this evening could lead us to question what makes a good story? What components do we need to keep us engaged and interested – and importantly what do we learn about God?

It is fair to say that Paul's dramatic conversion tells us a lot: he encounters the divine, he sees Jesus face to face, he gains an understanding of the Church, we see the power of God's grace working through Paul, we see a complete switch in Paul's values and we see the particular mission that he has been given - to be an apostle to the gentiles.

Paul's retelling of his conversion in our passage this evening, is interesting and it could lead us to ponder how many times he shared this story, it is mentioned three times in the book of Acts alone, and he also shares his story in his letter to the Galatians, this would suggest that he shared this story fairly regularly as we only have limited records of Paul's writings...

Why was it so important for Paul to keep on retelling his story? It seems there may be two elements, firstly it being a reminder to him of how God had worked in his life, which likely provided him with comfort and reassurance as he embarked upon mission after mission.

Another reason to share his story was to encourage and inspire the early Christians and call people to conversion. To be baptised even if they perhaps felt unworthy. Paul shares how his conversion led to baptism and then complete regeneration, his sins washed away and that this was available to all people. It does not seem coincidental that in our passage today Paul shares his story and then tells the people listening not to delay, to get up and be baptised and to have their sins washed away.

I've always found Paul's transformation story inspiring, but also something that I have been able to connect with quite deeply, its safe to say that my life was going down a very dark path full of shame, guilt and addiction, then about 7 years ago God transformed my life, I found myself in church, much to my own surprise and my families surprise! I became sober and started living a life with God by my side and have been transformed by the love of God, countless blessings have been poured out into my life since I started journeying with God. I am very grateful that I heard the words to get up and be baptised and have my sins washed away.

Both our passages this evening show us something really important about God, that God can transform what appears to be dark and sinful into something unimaginably holy and beautiful, this does not mean that a baptised person never faces sin again, but that through baptism we are continually reminded to turn back to God and seek forgiveness, which is readily available to us through Jesus. We see how even in the

roots of something disturbing like exile or killing the early Christians God can transform this into goodness.

In Isaiah, we heard the second servant song, and it directs us to a positive outcome. Although the Israelites have been through challenging times and exile along with struggles to keep their covenant with God. God is reminding them that even through all this darkness, a light is coming, God is encouraging the Israelites that even though they stray and fail, he knows them and will find a way to bring them back into relationship with Him. So, this is an entire nation that God is refusing to let go of even when they have fallen into sin.

With Paul, we see a single person on the path to destruction, what is beautiful and in contrast to the nation, is that this is an individual person, which demonstrates how God is working through Nations but also does not neglect individuals. Showing that all human life is important to God, anyone going down a dark route, God is wanting to open their eyes and hearts to Him, and to transform them, that they can get up and be baptised and have their sins washed away.

It is a wonderful thing that Paul shared his story, that we can read, acknowledge and inwardly digest. We see how God moved into what seemed like a disastrous situation and use it for good.

The dramatic change in Paul is such a testimony to the saving love of God, that his story alone must have encouraged people to believe in Christ. Every person has a hunger and a desire to be made new, where sins and past regrets can be washed away.

The early Christians must have felt inspired when they sat and listened to Paul sharing his story, there would have been little else that they could do other than to get up and be baptised without delay.

We can also be people who share our stories of God's transformative nature in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. Stories may be a person's first encounter of God, so we ought to be bold in sharing how God is with us in the good times and through hard times, we can be people who share how God transforms our lives daily, encouraging others to get up be baptised and have their sins washed away.

Amen