

Encountering the Risen Christ

Text: Acts 9:1-19a

The other week when I was wandering along Prince's Street with the kids, we dropped into the closing down sales of HMV, and came out with a bargain copy the *Tinker, Tailor, Solider, Spy* DVD. The movie (and the book) tells the story of the confrontation of two master spies at the height of the Cold War: George Smiley and his Russian rival Karla. Karla has planted a mole at the top of the British Secret Service, and Smiley has to flush the mole out. At one point, Smiley recounted to one of his junior colleagues how he once came face to face with Karla. The conclusion Smiley drew from the encounter was this: 'I know he can be beaten, because he's a fanatic. And the fanatic is always concealing a secret doubt.'

Saul the pharisee was a fanatic. He was absolutely sure that the Christians were wrong - a crucified failed revolutionary could not possible be God's Messiah to lift the Jews out of the doldrums. Indeed, to say that a crucified man was the Son of God was plain blasphemy, and blasphemers should be executed. And so, we find that Saul was there when the crowds stoned to death the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen. Earlier in *Acts*, we read that those stoning Stephen

'laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul ... And Saul approved of their killing him.' (7:58, 8:1)

After that, a great persecution broke out. Saul played his full part - he went from house to house 'dragging off both men and women ... to prison' (8:3).

Our reading today picks up the story from there. Not content with persecuting Christians just in Jerusalem, Saul now comes with warrants to arrest them in Damascus. But something mysterious happened on the way, and, strangely, a few weeks later, Saul became one of the most outspoken apologists for the new Christian movement.

What happened on the Damascus Road is usually taken as one of the classic examples of a 'sudden conversion'. A blinding light from heaven and a direct message from God, and wham, a new Christian. Such instant conversion fits in well with the spirit of our times - add water, put into the microwave for two minutes, and *voilà*, there's dinner. If only God would do instant conversions more often, all our troubles would be over!

But such a 'snap' picture of Saul's conversion is very far from what Luke actually tells us. Listen to Saul's own account of it later in Chapter 26 of the Acts of the Apostles. There, he tells us what the voice from heaven said to him:

'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' (v.14)

That second part of the message, which we did not get in our reading today, is very interesting. A 'goad' is a spiked stick used to prod the backside of cattle to persuade them to move on. According to the voice from heaven, Saul the fanatic had been 'kicking against the goads'. That, of course, is a line taken straight from George Smiley - Saul was harbouring secret doubts, which was why he turned into a fanatic persecuting the Christians. The outward fanaticism helped lessen the inner pain of kicking against the goads - secret doubts about his outward certainty that the Christians were wrong about Jesus.

And Luke left us in little doubt when the first seeds of doubt were sown in Saul's mind - at Stephen's death. Luke's description of the scene is very like modern cinema. The camera stays focussed on the dying Stephen for an extended period - the whole of Chapter 7, in fact. But immediately after Stephen died, the camera suddenly swings round to Saul, until then a minor character who was there just to look after everyone's coats. The camera zooms into his face - 'And Saul approved of their killing him,' we read. And that was the point when Saul turned a fanatic - the implication cannot be clearer: it was watching Stephen die that sewed the first seeds of doubt in

Saul's mind. To assuage those doubts, he became a fanatic persecutor.

What, then, did Saul see in the dying Stephen? Luke again left us in no doubt - Saul the pharisee saw Jesus in Stephen. I don't have time to go over the Stephen story in detail. I would encourage you to read it yourself later today in Chapters 6 and 7. As you read the story, you will have no difficulty in hearing quite deliberate echoes of Luke's earlier description of Jesus in his Gospel. These echoes get louder throughout the story, until at the very end we read this:

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'

Where have we heard *that* before?

Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them: for they do not know what they are doing.' ... Then, Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.'

Both of these sayings were recorded by Luke alone in his Gospel. What Saul witnessed was a death in the manner of Jesus. Since then, he presumably has had many more occasions to witness Jesus in action when he dragged Christians off to prison. It is then, and only then, when, on the Damascus Road, a voice says to him,

'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

That 'me' could only make any sense to Saul after he had seen Jesus in the face of Stephen, and thereafter in the faces of those he had subsequently dragged off to prison. To have to cope with the repeated forgiveness offered to him by those whom he persecutes is precisely what it means for Saul to be kicking against the goads. Such forgiveness hurts. And now, he was offered a chance to turn that hurt into something transformative. What he has to do is to accept this forgiveness. But *not* directly from the mysterious aura of light that represented the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road.

That's perhaps how we would have written the screen play, to shorten the story a bit. The voice from heaven says to Saul, 'But I forgive you.' Saul accepts, and Jesus commissions him to be an apostle. No, the actual story is far more interesting than that.

Saul, now blind, was led into Damascus, to a house in Straight Street. You can still visit the street today, and one of the earliest photos of it can be seen in the Queen's Gallery right now, taken by a . There, at a B&B in Straight Street, Saul had to accept forgiveness from a flesh-and-blood human being, not a disembodied voice from heaven. What the voice from heaven cannot supply was, quite literally, the right touch:

[Ananias] laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus sent me to you ...'

The effect of this physical, embodied act was dramatic and instantaneous:

'And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.'

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

The story of the long process leading to Saul's conversion confirms the truth of this poem by St. Teresa of Avila. In particular, Saul's story tells us that Christ has no body on earth to hurt but ours:

'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?'

And Christ has no feet to go to those who hurt us and no hands to reach out to forgive them but ours. What is particularly interesting is that the conversion of the main character in the Acts of the Apostle was all about Saul becoming madder and madder at being forgiven by those whom he persecutes, and then finally yielding to this forgiveness as offered in a simple gesture of touch.

That, as far as Luke is concerned, is at the centre of the gospel of the resurrected Jesus. There can be no confrontation with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road without Stephen, without the many who were dragged off to prison subsequently, and without Ananias. Perhaps we do not hear of miraculous conversion by voices from heaven very much today because our feet and our hands have not been those of our risen Lord.

Who do I need to forgive? More importantly, who do I need to be forgiven by? Unless we quite literally take steps and reach out to answer those questions, each for ourselves, we will *never* be convinced that Christ is risen; and we will never convince anyone else that Christ is risen either.

Let us pray.

Risen Lord, give us grace that we may have the humility to accept forgiveness, and the boldness to forgive, so that we may experience your risen presence and bring this presence to others.
Amen