



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**20 September 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity**

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### **Introduction**

Hello and welcome. My name's Philippa and I'm one of the clergy at Christ Church. We've changed the structure of this recorded sermon slightly, so that you're going to hear a reading, then the sermon, and finally some prayers – finishing with the Lord's Prayer. Please do join me in those prayers.

Our reading is from the book of Acts, and the sermon this morning is about St Paul.

### **Acts 26:1, 9–25**

Paul stretched out his hand and began to defend himself:

'Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth...

'With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." I asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

'After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that

they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.'

St Paul provokes strong emotions.

He's a dominant figure in the New Testament: both as a character in the accounts of the early Church in the Book of Acts, but also as himself an author - author of a number of the letters that were gathered together to form the middle section of the New Testament.

Paul as a character gets probably more screen time than anyone else except Jesus; and Paul as a writer wrote probably more words in the New Testament than anyone else – except Luke the author of the Gospel of Luke and of Acts and even that depends how you count it! But Paul isn't just a dominant figure in terms of quantity; he has a dominant quality as well. When Paul appears on the page everybody else fades into the background. You get that sense in the narrative about Paul which takes over the Book of Acts. You get it also in the letters that Paul wrote. Here is a forceful personality: a person who knows what he thinks, who doesn't really care what other people think of him. A person who is driven by ideals and by calling, and perhaps not understanding the other forces that drive people. The kind of person, in short, who does provoke strong emotion. It's not surprising if, as we read Paul's words in our own Bibles in church or at home, we find ourselves feeling strongly about him – the New Testament itself is a record of strong emotions from or towards Paul, letters written in the context of strained relationships or relationships where what Paul thought and what a church thought we're not always the same.

So that's the kind of man we've met in Acts. In the part of his story I read, Paul is defending himself formally – he's on trial. (Maybe it doesn't surprise you that the kind of person I've described is the kind of person who ends up having a run-in with the authorities, as a prisoner of conscience, and eventually on trial.) He's been arrested for the crime of preaching an unauthorised religion – a significant crime in the Roman empire, where the state religion – in which the emperor was equivalent to a god – was an important way of keeping the peace. In response, he turns to the local governor – a man called Festus – and the local sub-king, Agrippa, to explain himself: this is who I am, this is how I'm called, this is why I'm doing what I do.

If you'd read the whole of Acts up to this point – and if you haven't, please do, it's a brilliant set of stories – you'd know that Paul started out as a high-flying young theologian – already, I think, the

forceful personality we come to meet later. After the followers of the itinerant rabbi, Jesus, began to become more prominent, Paul devoted his energy to opposing them – to doing what he saw as stamping out heresy, to stopping the perversion of the Jewish faith he loved and to which he had committed his life.

All this is by his own account – but by the time he tells his own story, he has a complicated relationship to it. Because something had happened to him that changed his whole outlook; his whole understanding of who he was; his whole understanding of what God wanted him to do.

Paul – this clever young academic, this forceful personality, this person who was convinced that what he thought was inevitably right; who had spent his life studying God's law and trying to serve God better, and who because of that had ended up persecuting Christians – suddenly met God.

Or to unpack that a bit: something happened to Paul which he could only understand as God appearing to him. He knew, from his study of the Jewish Scriptures, all about the people who had seen God directly – his heroes of faith. Moses, who met God in a burning bush and heard his call; the elders of Israel in Moses' time, who saw God enthroned in glory on the holy mountain; Elijah, who heard God in the silence after the crashing of earthquakes and hurricanes; Elisha, who saw God catch his teacher Elijah up in a chariot made of fire. So when he saw a bright and blinding light, stopping him in his tracks; a bright light all around him and a voice from heaven calling his name – he knew this could be nothing but God.

And what does the voice of God say? I am Jesus. Jesus whom you're persecuting.

A bright light from heaven and a voice from God who knew his name and suddenly Paul – so full of faith, so full of love for God, so full of conviction that what he was doing was God's calling – had to stop and work out what it meant if the God whom he loved was the same as the Jesus whom he was persecuting.

And as we hear him telling his story while on trial in Acts – a story he'd told many times before by this point – he skips over what he did next: prayed, waited, and was welcomed by a very courageous Christian community, who themselves received God's instructions to take him in, answer his questions and look after him. Instead, he fast-forwards to the way of living to which he dedicated the whole of his life after that: travelling, teaching and preaching. Going to everywhere he possibly could to tell people that Jesus is alive and brings hope and salvation and healing to the world, and to every single person. And once he had told them that – the most important bit – then telling them that this meant they had a responsibility to live as people of hope and salvation and healing in their turn: living

in communities that displayed the love of God, that mirrored the life of God, that shared the hope of God with the world.

I said at the beginning that Paul provokes strong emotions, and you can probably tell that in my case, I'm very fond of him. I think he's important and his story is worth thinking about because he's a flawed human being whose flaws are completely evident in writing about and by him, and nevertheless he is loved and called by God. I'm fond of Paul because when I read his letters I have an image of him pacing up and down getting more and more excited, working out what he thinks as he goes along; because he really cares about theology, he really cares about Jesus, he really cares about helping people to understand. And I picture his poor scribe sitting in the corner frantically scribbling trying to get it all down. Sometimes when you read Paul's letters the argument is so confused that it's clear the scribe didn't manage it! I'm fond of Paul because he was so busy, so excited, so keen to serve God by preaching and teaching that he forgot that you also serve God by looking after your friends and your colleagues, by proofreading your work, by editing the letters you send so that they don't make the recipients confused or upset.

But mostly I'm fond of Paul because he shows us what it is to change your mind. Paul is the kind of person we all know, who throws himself into everything with total enthusiasm and total commitment. But he's also the kind of person (and these are much rarer!) who, when new information comes in; when something happens that makes him realise that there might be a different way; is willing to stop to consider this new information, to change his mind, to start doing something perhaps completely different yet with exactly the same level of enthusiasm.

That's what we see in the story of the blinding light and the voice of Jesus. And that's what we hear in Paul's concern in all his letters for people to change their behaviour in a way that takes account of what God has done in Jesus, of who God is in Jesus. It's what we see in Paul's conviction that this was important enough to give his life to it.

What happened to Paul, although in a rather dramatic way for a rather dramatic personality, is what happens to all of us. However, we first learnt to know God, however we became Christians, there are always times when we don't follow God closely. Things happen. We change our minds; we get it wrong. Sometimes we know that we're slipping away – sometimes we deliberately stop following Jesus – but sometimes we get side-tracked without realising it. We start believing the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing – hopefully not chasing Christians to Damascus to try and kill them! – and then, dramatically or subtly we realise we're on the wrong path. Perhaps somebody says something; a sermon speaks to us; a friend sends us a poem, not realising what effect it would have; we read the

newspaper and see the needs of the world in a new way; we hear somebody explaining what it's like to be somebody very different from us...

and when these things happen, we have to change our minds. It takes strength and grace and courage to change your mind in the face of new information. Perhaps one of the things about Paul is that he needed the blinding light, the unambiguous instruction. Perhaps we're that kind of person and we also need something blinding and unambiguous; perhaps we're much more susceptible to a quiet word, a gentle nudge from the Holy Spirit. But each of us needs to change our minds from time to time.

So when we hear Paul's story of how Jesus appeared to him, let's take that as a story for each of us; telling us not that Jesus needs to appear to us in a blinding light, a flash of lightning, shouting our name from the heavens; but instead we must be ready for Jesus to appear to us in all sorts of quieter, more subtle ways. We are called to carry on reading the Bible; to carry on going to church, whether in person or at a distance; to carry on learning more about God and learning more about the people around us; so that when we go off track, the word of God in scripture, in our Christian communities, and revealed in the world, can nudge us back into the right relationship with God, the right way of being God's people in the world.

And that's really what Paul was concerned about. In his letters he writes very little about himself. It's much more about Jesus: about who Jesus is and what Jesus called us to do. Paul spends his life convincing people that Jesus is alive; Jesus is important; Jesus has meaning for the world – and the meaning of Jesus is salvation.

If we are behaving as if Jesus is salvation, as if the teachings of Jesus have meaning for us, as if the teachings of Jesus have an implication for the world, as if the teachings of Jesus really can bring hope and salvation and freedom; then we are, like Paul, doing the Lord's work and doing the work to which we are called.

That will look different for each of us. As Paul did, we will get things wrong and have to get back on track. We will need to be ready for things to change throughout our lives, as they did for Paul. But our calling is always to be God's people in the world; to be God's saved and redeemed people, the people God loves so much he sent Jesus and the people who because we are saved and redeemed can bring that salvation, that light, that hope and that healing into the world.

So let us pray:

## Intercessions

As we give thanks for Paul, and for the churches he founded, we pray for the Church:

God of all grace, have mercy on all your people.

Give us a new vision of your glory and an abiding love for your Son.

Renew our faith and our trust, and remind us of your love.

Give us your grace to follow your call  
and to proclaim your salvation in every place.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

As we give thanks for the way Paul changed his mind and was willing to serve God in new ways and new places, we pray for one another:

God of all grace, give your people humility and patience,  
gentleness and compassion.

Teach us to hear the voices of those who are unlike us,  
to value the insights of those who can teach us,  
to open our minds to what you have to say to us.

Restore us to your path and make us faithful to your calling.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

As we give thanks for the love and the mercy of God shown above all in Jesus, we pray that God would show that same mercy in the world now:

God of all grace, in a world of pain and confusion, be present.

In a nation full of uncertainty, be present.

With all who are in trouble, sorrow or need, be present.

Give wisdom and courage to decision-makers,  
strength and relief to care-takers,  
comfort and healing to all who are struggling in any way,  
and your hope to all people.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We hold before God those whom we have prayed for  
in prayers spoken aloud and heard in our hearts,  
all those who have asked for our prayers  
and those who have nobody to pray for them.

And we gather our prayers and praises in the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done,  
in earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever.  
Amen.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with  
us all, evermore.  
Amen.