

Date: Sunday 5/5/19
Occasion: Easter 3
Service: 8.00 and 10.00 at St James's

Readings: Acts 9.1 – 20; Revelation 5.11 – end; John 21.1 – 19.

CHANGE OF MIND. CHANGE OF HEART

I used to hate shopping with my aunty Ethel. Don't get me wrong, I loved staying with her during school holidays and playing with my cousins. I loved her kind smile and wonderful cooking. I was intrigued by the outside toilet attached to her council house on the Norris Green estate in Liverpool (the council had offered to install one indoors, but she and my uncle Harold thought it undignified to relieve oneself inside the house).

The problem was shopping, and I don't mean the everyday shopping at the local newsagent, butcher and the like, where everyone always seemed to be pulling someone's leg and there was lots of laughter. No. When I say shopping I mean the expeditions to Liverpool city centre which always began at the returns counter in Marks and Spencer. You see, aunty Ethel had made changing her mind into an art form. Her vacillation and changes of mind over clothes were legendary and for a small boy both baffling and frustrating. After all, I wasn't allowed to change *my* mind over clothes – but then, my mum chose them, so my opinion was never going to matter even if I expressed it.

We often speak of people, ourselves and others, changing their minds. Everyone does it; some, like my aunty Ethel, more than we would wish; some so infrequently that they become

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annoying, in which case we call them stubborn, or frightening, in which case we call them fanatics, bigots, terrorists.

St Paul was a fanatic. That much is clear from his own letters and in this passage from Acts. To try and understand this it's worth trying to put ourselves in the position of Ananias.

Faithful, terrified, listening for news from Jerusalem where bad things were happening to others who followed the Way of Jesus. Grateful to be alive, always waiting for a knock on the door – if the authorities even bothered knocking! Familiar then. All too familiar now. Then shocking news – Saul, the great persecutor has changed and needs Ananias to do something for him. How terrifying must that have been?

How wonderful then is the example set by Ananias in visiting Saul. I hope he asked around a bit first, because as Christians we are called to faithfulness not dangerous naivete.

But go he did. And what did Ananias find? A man broken by his inner conflicts, who had come full tilt into a dead end of his own making and who had crashed. Trapped by his own determination, Paul could see no way out other than to pursue people like Ananias, so as to avoid facing the God who was pursuing him – who pursues us all. Paul is the embodiment of Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me...

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

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If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

If I make my bed in Sheol you are there

Paul had made his bed in Sheol and now was the time for him to be shown a way out. How many people find themselves, so to speak in Sheol? How many people find themselves, in countless ways, hemmed in by 'certainties' that turn out to be anything other than certain, beliefs that rather than allowing them and others to flourish, wreak havoc and destruction on them and those around them?

- Men trapped by destructive understandings of what it means to be male, who destroy the lives – sometimes all too literally – of their partners and families;
- White Australians who shoot Muslims at prayer;
- Christians in the United States who murder doctors in the name of preserving life;
- Those who claim to follow an Islam that no reasonable law abiding Muslim recognises as the faith handed down to them.

Let's be clear. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that there is nowhere, no person, nothing that God's grace cannot restore to fullness of life. The story of Paul and Ananias is an example of how this might work in practice: Ananias learned by accepting the task of playing a part in Paul's discovery of that same truth. Stumbling, terrified no doubt, he didn't just change his mind about Paul, he opened his heart to God's grace, making it possible for Paul to continue to change and for him, Ananias, to

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take a tentative, fearful step deeper into the riches of faithfulness – to experience a change of heart.

We now know that Paul's change of heart was the event that lit a fire that continues to burn. Without Paul, there would be no Christian faith as we know it. Without Paul we may never have learned that there is always a way back. Without Ananias, there may not have been a Paul as we know him. When his eyes opened, it is possible that the first thing Paul saw was the puzzled, terrified face of a brother in Christ about whom he and we know next to nothing – except that he said yes to God's call, which is another way of saying that Ananias had a change of heart. Not just a change of mind about a man he mistrusted. But a change of heart as important as that undergone by Paul, because it was a change of heart that flew in the face of his instinct for survival and his suspicion of a man with a murderous reputation. It's a desperately hard lesson, but it's one we must all learn amid the dangers and uncertainties of this wonderful, flawed, beautiful and fragile world so beloved of God.

May God grant us all grace to hold to that which is true and wonderful and full of love; may God also grant us the grace to change our minds and our hearts, that as we meet him in words of life, bread and wine and one another, we may see what God sees and desire what God desires – that every human being should learn to love and be loved, and to flourish in the kingdom without end. **Amen.**