



Fifth Sunday Easter 2006

Acts 9: 26-31 1 John 3: 18-24 John 15: 1-8

Chapter Nine of Acts tells the story of Saul/Paul's journey to faith in the risen Christ. He travels the road from persecutor to persecuted. In this part of the story he visits Jerusalem. He escaped from Damascus, where his life was threatened, by being slipped over the city wall in a basket.

Like Moses, a great saving figure, he experiences salvation through the efforts of a community.

Having escaped one set of problems Saul encounters some new ones. The disciples in Jerusalem are scared of him. Some thought his conversion story was a trick to infiltrate the group and continue his persecution of the followers of *The Way*.

Saul met and was befriended by a man named Barnabus. Bar nabus means son of consolation and he lived his name. He took Saul under his wing introducing him to the small groups of followers of *The Way*.

Saul began his preaching ministry but again there were more difficulties. This time it was the Greek-speaking Jews with whom he debated. They responded violently so again he had to be rescued and he was taken to Caesarean en route for Tarsus. We can't imagine the humiliation it caused Saul to be so dependant on others. Saul had been a scholar and a force to be reckoned with in Jewish academic circles and now he was a despised man on the run.

The passage ends with an important summary statement. It says that the church was at peace. It was being built up and was making steady progress in the fear of the Lord while enjoying the increased consolation of the Holy Spirit.

There are some interesting things to be learned from this story. No one is Christian apart from the community. Paul learns that it is in the community and with the community that his ministry finds its authorisation. Even though he claimed a personal call from Jesus this was not enough to legitimise his ministry. There are no "free-lance" ministers or ministries. If the church does not authorise the work then it is not a ministry. The acceptance of Saul's membership and ministry was authorised by Ananias to whom he went for baptism.

The words of Jesus in Saul's conversion story are also significant. Jesus names himself as the object of Saul's attacks. The community that is church is one with Christ.

John in the Gospel also speaks of the importance of community through the metaphor of the vine. God is the owner of the vine. Jesus is the vine. All those who

respond to the call of God, become signs of the universal love of God, as Jesus did, and become grafted to the vine. Once a piece of wood is grafted to the mother stock the same life flows through the whole plant.

The branches produce the choice wine of justice, freedom, healing and wholeness. For the fruit to be good pruning is needed.

Christian spirituality has sometimes seen this pruning in terms of personal purification and has even sanctioned some extraordinary penances. However, pruning must be in relation to community. We are called to give up our egocentric attitudes for God-centred attitudes.

These attitudes are about community building. We are called to gather scattered humanity into the wholeness of healthy relationships for it is these relationships that make us truly human.

Saul experienced pain and hardship in his ministry but the community was his support and enabler.

The letter from John speaks of Christian living. Love which is the heart of community is an active love. Words are not enough, through our acts of love-our community building we attain peace which removes any shortcomings we have.

As the writer says, "God's heart is greater than our heart."

Patricia Stevenson rsj.