

# Confronting Conversion

*A sermon on Acts 9:1-20 & John 21:1-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 5 August 2019*

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## Message

Conversion to the way of Jesus is not just a matter of belief, but requires a serious reckoning with our past complicity with attacks on his way.

## Sermon

The word “Christian” occurs only three times in the Bible, and one of them, in the eleventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, actually tells us about the first time this word was used to identify the followers of Jesus. So at the beginning of our first reading tonight, Saul was seeking authorisation to seek out and destroy a people who were not yet called Christians. So how were they identified? Who was he being authorised to attack?

There are two phrases used. One is “the disciples of the Lord”, but that seems to be the narrator’s term, not Saul’s. It’s not absolutely clear whether the second one is Saul’s either, but it appears that it might have been. It says that he received authority to find “any who belonged to the Way” and bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Those who belong to the Way. I want to unpack that phrase in a rather round about way, but before I do, I want us to pause to note what sort of related phrases we more commonly use when we are not using the brand name “Christian”. Probably the one that would be most similar to “those who belong to the Way” would be “those who belong to the faith”, and I reckon that one is pretty common. I wonder what might have been lost when we moved from thinking about belonging to “a Way” to thinking about belonging to “a faith”.

To begin unpacking that question, I want us to look at two stories we heard tonight, the story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and Saul, and the story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and Simon Peter. I’m not sure if Jesus had a particular dislike for names that started with “S” or a preference for those starting with “P”, but both of these guys had their names changed when they met Jesus: Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. But the name change was the least of the changes they had to confront.

Saul’s life-changing encounter with the risen Jesus is sufficiently well known and powerfully archetypal that we still talk about people having “a road to Damascus experience”. You will commonly hear it said that Saul was knocked off his horse, but it doesn’t actually say that anyone or anything knocked him off. It says that suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, and “he fell to the ground”. There’s actually no mention of a horse, and if there was, he fell off it rather than anyone knocking him off it.

The point is that what was revealed to Saul in that flash of light was enough to make anyone fall to the ground. You see, Saul had every reason to believe that he was the Lord’s special agent embarking on the Lord’s special mission to protect and advance the Lord’s cause in the world. He was not like some of those ISIS hotheads who are full of anger against non-Muslims but who actually have very little understanding of Islam themselves. No, Saul was one of the best educated members of the most devoutly religious sector of Judaism. He could have proved to you the legitimacy of his mission from the scriptures ten times before

breakfast, and you'd have no chance of matching his arguments. He had every reason to be sure he was right, to be sure that he was on the Lord's side.

There is a bit of a hint in this story that as he was travelling along the road, Saul may have been practicing a particular meditation exercise that was popular among the Pharisees (described by NT Wright in his commentary, *New Testament for Everyone*). It involved meditating on the vision from the first chapter of Ezekiel where the prophet saw a great chariot of flashing light carried by creatures with four faces and four wings approach a shining throne on which appeared one in human form that was "the appearance of the glory of the Lord." When Ezekiel saw this, he says "I fell on my face and heard the voice of someone speaking."

The meditation involved seeing how deeply you could go into the vision yourself, with the goal of hopefully being surrounded by the light of heaven and able to catch at least a glimpse of the one who was the appearance of the glory of the Lord. Saul's description of being surrounded by light, falling to the ground, and hearing a voice speaking to him is entirely consistent with the goal of this meditation.

Whether or not that was what Saul was doing, the possibility helps us comprehend the depth of shock that he experienced here. Imagine him zealously on mission for the Lord, deeply into this prayerful meditation, straining to see or hear the one who was the appearance of the glory of the Lord, and in this moment he achieves his goal, and to his unimaginable horror, the one he sees and hears is the very one whose legacy and followers he is presently murderously intent on wiping out, "in the name of the Lord".

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" says the one who was the appearance of the glory of the Lord. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

We talk about this as the conversion of Saul, and rightly so, but that's the reason I want us to take note of the question the risen Jesus is asking him. Think back to our question about belonging to the Way or belonging to the faith. The question is not "Saul, Saul, do you believe in me?" or "Saul, Saul, do you have faith in me?" or "Saul, Saul, do you accept me as your personal lord and saviour?" It is "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" or "Saul, Saul, why are you trying to wipe out those who follow my Way?"

Saul is not confronted by a new belief to think about. He is confronted with the crucified victim of his own zeal, and a challenge to change his ways, to follow a new Way.

Let's cut across to the story of Simon Peter's encounter with the risen Jesus. At this time of year, we enact this story each Sunday at the close of our liturgy as we hear the risen Jesus ask us three times, "do you love me?" But what you may not have noticed about this story is its deliberate connection to a previous story about Peter. The gospel writer adds an extra hint when he tells us that this conversation happens beside a charcoal fire on the beach. Only once before in the gospel has he mentioned a charcoal fire. While Jesus was being interrogated in the High Priest's house, Peter was warming himself by a charcoal fire in the courtyard outside when people started asking if he was one of Jesus's followers, and three times he denied even knowing him.

He has been so sure that there was no way he would ever let Jesus down, but just as Jesus had predicted, when the heat was on and the tide was turning against Jesus, Peter got caught in

the furious riptide that silenced all dissent and swept everyone into complicity with the lynching of Jesus.

So now, by another charcoal fire in the uncomfortable presence of the one he had denied, Peter is again questioned three times. And interestingly, Jesus reverts to calling him by his original name; his unconverted name? “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Once for each denial. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Just like Saul, Jesus confronts Peter with his part in the quest to wipe out the Way of Jesus. Peter had not been an active zealous persecutor like Saul, but all that is needed for evil to prevail, they say, is for good people to remain silent, and even though he had been warned, and swore he could withstand it, Peter had fallen silent and stood aside as the rooster crowed and evil had its way. “I know what you did back there by that charcoal fire in the courtyard, Simon, son of John, so I ask you now, do you love me?”

And in response to each of Peter’s pleading professions of love and commitment, Jesus points him to a new way and commissions to leadership on the new way. “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Which of course, with different words and a different feel, is exactly what the risen Jesus says to Saul too. “I have chosen you to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”

Both are lifted from their enslavement to one way, a way of rejection and crusading hostility, and both are commissioned to be the leaders of a new way, a way of that will constantly face rejection and hostility, but will only respond with love and mercy and gracious hospitality, no matter what the cost.

Do you get a sense then of how differently we might understand our conversions when we grasp the difference between “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” and “Saul, Saul, do you believe in me?” Although they can and should mean the same thing, in our protestant evangelical traditions, we have too often turned “do you believe in me?” into little more than intellectual assent, a test of doctrinal correctness. But Saul is not being asked to merely adjust his theological ideas, but to confront the bloody consequences of the way he has sought to live his faith, and to begin to live in a completely different way, to follow the Way, the Way of the crucified and risen victim of his own crusading.

Most of us probably relate more readily to Peter’s cowering silent complicity than to Saul’s violent zeal, but the stories are telling us that the choice we face is the same. Our hands are just as covered in blood. We live in a nation that was founded on a lie perpetrated by people who were sure they were doing the will of God when they claimed possession of the land and slaughtered any of the dispossessed first nations people who tried to stand against their expansion of the way of the empire of their God and King. Even now, we mostly try to keep warm by our charcoal fires and stay silent about the injustices perpetrated in our name in immigration detention centres, in prisons, in lock-up psych wards, in all the places where we hide the victims of our need to maintain the illusion that we are good and kind and uncorrupted, and not at all like those strange people who scare us.

Especially in the midst of an election campaign, our politicians, who perhaps also know not what they do, willingly fuel our fears and stoke the fires of hostile division in their quest to ride the wave to electoral success. They encourage us to see ourselves as the righteous victims

under siege from those whose strange and foreign ways are a threat to the integrity of all we hold dear, and then they promise like Saul to take up the fight for us to protect us from people of “that” way.

But whether he confronts us in a flash of light that overtakes us on the road, or confronts us in uncomfortable questions as we warm ourselves by the fire, Jesus asks us to face up to the truth of the way we have been following, or been swept along in; to face up to our silent complicity, and our blindness to the lives that have been broken under the grinding wheels of our national mythology, our cultural supremacism, and our religious imperiousness.

But Jesus doesn't leave us face down on the roadside, or squirming in embarrassment by the fire. He calls us to face up to the way we have been following, and to change course, to receive his commission, to embrace a new way, to become people of the Way, the Way of Jesus, the Way of suffering love.

The truth is that left to ourselves, we could never do it. Even at our best, when we begin to recognise the past sins that underpin our culture, it quickly mutates into a fetishisation of victimhood and a perverse competition to be the most deserving victims. The truth is that, like Peter, whatever we like to hope for ourselves, we do not have the strength to resist the power of religious and cultural zeal or the fear of being turned on by the mob that leaves us cowering in silence by the fire.

It would take a miracle to open our eyes and embolden our hearts to embrace another way. It would take an impossible miracle. It would take the kind of miracle that could raise our crucified victim from the dead; the kind of miracle that could open a tomb; the kind of miracle that could render a executed man far more alive than anyone else; the kind of miracle that sees a betrayed and murdered victim overflowing with forgiveness by a charcoal fire; the kind of miracle that draws us here tonight and gathers us around this table to be converted anew as people of the Way, the Way of the crucified and risen Jesus.