

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 14 APRIL 2013
Rev. Deacon Jenny Preston
Acts 9: 1-20

“Dare We Forgive”

(Narration of Acts 9: 1-20 with Saul and two off-siders leaving Jerusalem full of murderous intent against the followers of The Way in Damascus. Lights, voices – yet no-one around; Saul now blinded, led into Damascus by his off-siders. Ananias, a leader of The Way in Damascus, is challenged, indeed commanded, to heal and baptize Saul for his new role of missionary to the Gentiles.)

The only constant is change! that's a familiar saying - even though we often resist change! – especially in the church! Yet, change is part of our heritage as a church, a Christian community. We're part of a Living Spirit who calls and guides us in ways towards greater inclusion, healing and witness.

Ross shared some of his thoughts – as Saul dealt with the huge challenge/change he was precipitated into so suddenly. What a challenge for Ananias and his community? to let go of prejudice and see in new ways themselves? Here was a community being called upon to offer grace and justice to someone who has had murderous intentions towards them. This is an example of resurrection at work within the life of the Damascus faith community.

You might have wondered: what precipitated the conflict within the synagogue, that led to Saul's intention of harassing the followers of The Way in Damascus - they weren't yet known as Christians.

Luke's claim that Paul would have been able to arrest people and bring them to Jerusalem is pretty doubtful, because that would go way beyond any jurisdiction exercised by the high priest as we understand it. Still, it is clear that Paul is committed to stamping out the new movement. From his own writings we have his first hand testimony that he "persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13).

Perhaps more significantly, Paul must have understood why these Christians were dangerous. The issue of the inviolability of scripture and its law, and therefore the unique status of Israel, was at stake. Probably he had always pictured the kingdom of God as a highly exclusive "Members Only" club with a restricted membership.

Bill Loader suggests that within the Aramaic synagogue community the issues were not as severe as among the Greek-speaking synagogue community -- Acts tells us that there were a number of different Greek-speaking communities in Jerusalem, reflecting the different homelands from which people had come. For many of them, as for many diaspora people of other cultures even today, issues of maintaining identity were crucial. The reports that the new movement was advocating a stance towards scripture which would undermine or compromise that identity would have caused outrage, and insecurity. 'You can't meddle or make changes'.

Probably these Greek-speaking Christian Jews felt their own kind were edgy with them, so left town, taking news of The Way to the synagogues of neighbouring towns and cities. So the harassment was counterproductive: it actually spread the movement and stirred up new problems, especially as Gentile guests in the synagogues, sometimes called "god-fearers", also came to hear the Christian message in greater numbers.

The first Christians had to face a whole host of new questions, including whether to admit Gentiles, if so, whether to circumcise them, and what biblical laws they should observe, not to speak of the problems

entailed in eating regularly with them as a matter of course in the new Christian communities, something most Jews would see as a practice one should avoid unless absolutely necessary.

Paul flipped or froze – psychologically speaking, such an about face is quite credible. People's intensity in resistance tends to rise when they fear what they are resisting is perhaps valid. What evoked the change - or perhaps the straw which broke the camel's back - was the experience he had on the road to Damascus. Luke dresses it up or uses a dressed up version complete with sound and light effects.

Paul, himself, never indicates such detail, but he does in 1 Corinthians 15 include himself in the list of those to whom the risen Lord appeared - he belongs among the witnesses. In later years Paul could not talk enough about what he often referred to as “the mystery of grace.”

Have you ever been challenged to change your mind about something? or maybe realised that a slow and gradual change had been happening in your attitude towards some large issue, problem or relationship? What sort of things do we change our minds about?

For some of us, we're not put right in the hot seat like Paul, or Ananias – where life-changing decisions were made, maybe not instantly, but over those days that Ananias and his community did the gentling of the grace that God had asked of them. Their community allowed a place for Paul to be transformed, and for them to recognise themselves as a place of transformation.. They dared to offer grace and justice to one who had been unjust to their community members.

I guess like many young people, I was attracted to what was glamorous, what gave the impression of plenty and success, and the trappings which come with the Gods of Mammon. I was part of the church all my life, but I don't think I really began to have my mind, my being, really challenged until after I had post-natal depression at Ernabella Mission. We sometimes recoil thinking about some of the exclusionary or patronizing attitudes we shared with others in those days.

When we returned – we were living in the Mission flats in Kent Road Surrey Hills, it was then that we met Rev Dick Wootton. Dick and Betty's friendship was one of the healing events post-Ernabella and John and I became involved in Dick's work for Justice and Human Rights.

I would be preparing mailings describing the atrocities, the separations of families, the rigidity of the apartheid system in South Africa, and at the same time I'd read in the daily paper of the continuing support of much of the world for the Apartheid regime. We did help bring Nelson Mandela to Australia -- and oooh, did some powerful people find a reason to change their minds about why they had supported apartheid.

It was brilliantly illuminating watching Dessie Tutu chairing the Reconciliation commission in South Africa -- that slow-moving, heart-breakingly sad courtroom where enemies confronted each other, and allowed to be inserted into their hatred and fear of each other, their need for deep forgiveness and grace – what a gift that Reconciliation Commission has been to the entire world.

We've been privileged to meet David Vincent, a child-soldier from the Sudan. David has written the book *The Boy who wouldn't Die*; just now, he is back in Southern Sudan, with some of the South African Reconciliation folk, teaching that method of confronting the racism and prejudice within each soul. It's probably not surprising to learn that he works for peace with our friend from Afghanistan, Essan Dileri. Have you heard of Joy Balazo – she has worked with UnitingWorld for many years, and 10 years ago established the Young Ambassadors for Peace, acting as their leader and working with local communities to establish eight peacemaking centers in Asia and the Pacific. We've met Joy, and heard testimony to the work of mediation and peace-building among the 32 clans in the New Guinea southern highlands where the movement assisted in ending tribal conflicts. Joy now works in her home country of the Philippines. Joy's thirst for peace is one that crosses the lines that are sometimes drawn between tribes, between states and between faiths, and for her tireless work the World Methodist Council came to Australia recently to award her the World Methodist Peace Award. Prior recipients of the award, which began in

1977, include Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who we worked with many years ago.

Ananias was called to let go of preconceived ideas for the sake of the community. It took the whole community to begin the work of restoration needed.

It will take the whole community to begin to refute the un-informed racism which occurs on our public transport, or in our newspapers when desperate refugees arrive seeking safety. It will take a community committed to challenging pre-conceived ideas. We can open ourselves, like Paul and Ananias did, to being continually transformed in our understanding and our behaving.

Dare we find the gospel moment when we can re-connect, re-establish a relationship with those who may have been unjust to us? Dare we, given the life-changing example of Ananias, as well as the life-changing example of Paul, have the chance to offer forgiveness in our day-to-day lives? AMEN.