

**Wade Street 07.01.07 11am**  
**Forward with Christ (Acts 9:1-22)**

We stand at the beginning of a new year, 2007 stretching ahead into the distance.....

As I changed over the kitchen calendar, taking down a full and very scribbled on one and replacing it with an almost blank, fresh, clean one I felt a sense of nervousness mixed with just a hint of excitement. What will be in store for this next year ? What shape will it take, what will be scrawled all over it by next December ?

It's that same sense of nervousness mixed with excitement that I used to feel when starting to write in brand new school exercise book. All those fresh, lovely unblemished pages waiting to be filled, (until they became worried about budgets and we had to carry them over into the next year and prove when we'd finished one book and get it signed before being allowed another).

Or maybe a bit like on those very rare occasions when we get a decent amount of snow, going out late at night or early in the morning, and seeing a whole road untouched, unmarked, no footprints, just waiting to be walked on, leapt in, thrown around. Waiting for us to make our mark on it.

The very well known account of the apostle Paul's Damascus road experience seems a fitting one to think about today as we look ahead and wonder what God has in store for us in this new year stretching ahead. The year might already be a week old, we might already be used to writing '07', but this is the first time this year that we have met together as a worshipping community and so I think this morning it's important to consider what God might be saying to us, and how we might respond to Him in 2007. And to help us do that I'm going to look at Paul and Ananias – what happened to them, and their responses to God.

So here we have Paul, or Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, born in Tarsus, a Roman citizen, a Pharisee, educated by Gamaliel, someone who had made a name for himself because of his intellect, his devoutness and particularly his dislike of these followers of the Way, these troublesome Christians. Travelling along, full of purpose, knowing exactly where he was going, what he was doing, sure of himself and of his cause, when,.....WHAM ! a flash of light, a meeting with the risen Lord Jesus, and suddenly his life would never be the same again.

Expect the unexpected.

So if we're going to use aspects of Paul's story to help us think about the year ahead, the first thing I think we can really take on board is that we should 'expect the unexpected'. God has a habit of intervening in surprising ways at surprising times; of breaking through with his grace, power and glory when we would just never have seen it coming, maybe even when He is the last thing on our minds. Many people like to portray Christianity as dull and boring. I don't think that could be further from the truth. A life with God in the driving seat is about as exciting as it gets because we never really know where we'll end up next. As children my dad used to take our family on 'mystery tours'. As we went along in the car we used to try and guess what the destination would be. As time went on we sussed that these mystery tours always ended up by canals – my dad really liked canal boats- and so it got fractionally easier to guess. I'm sure many of us here this morning can give examples of times when God

has utterly surprised us with the new direction he is leading us, or of the message he seems to be giving us, or of the way he has worked in our lives. This year, keep those events in mind, keep Paul in mind and be prepared to expect the unexpected.

Be prepared for God to radically change you.

Secondly, be prepared for God to radically change you. Paul changed in a matter of moments from persecutor of Christians to ardent supporter; from despising Christ to loving Christ. God very definitely can and does change people.

But I want to sound a note of caution here too. Often we see conversion as a total rejection of one set of beliefs and a total embracing of another set. If that's the be all and end all of conversion, then I'm not sure that what happened to Paul was actually conversion. What I think happened to Paul was a radical experience that utterly convinced him to go forward with new focus. And that focus was Jesus. He didn't reject all that had gone before, his Jewishness. Instead he accepted Jesus as a fulfilment of all he believed. There's no doubt about the radical nature of that, nor of the impact on Paul, but it does help to make Paul's experience more relevant for us today. Because God may well have Damascus Road like changes for us to face in the coming year. Not a rejection of all that's gone before. Especially as many of us here this morning would describe ourselves as Christians, committed followers of Jesus Christ. But instead an experience of Jesus that convinces us to go forward with new enthusiasm, commitment and focus.

Nothing is too difficult for God

And thirdly, nothing is too difficult for God. We sing about it, we probably say it, but do we actually in our heart of hearts believe it ?

Who would have thought that Paul, zealous persecutor of Christians could turn around so dramatically following a meeting with Jesus ?

When I think about Paul I can't help but think about a young man called David

David was a teenager in our youth group when Ian and I were youth leaders and still pretending to be cool !. He was a nightmare. He was sarcastic and very intelligent. He used to destroy the discussions in one sentence, he was far cleverer than us. He was the last person we expected to commit his life to Christ. You know the saying 'O ye of little faith'? Boy, was that phrase appropriate for me ! David had a radical experience of Jesus, was baptised, went on about it so much that his mom, dad and sister became Christians and were later baptised. He then went to Bible college and is now working with a missionary in Bristol. He's still very intelligent, very clever with his use of words, quick in discussion and conversation, but now he uses his intellect and sharpness for advancing God's Kingdom, not trying to knock Christianity down. I think of David as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Paul.

John Stott has this to say about what God can do: Saul (or Paul) did not 'decide for Christ' as we might say. It was rather Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life. There is nothing that is too difficult for God. Let's travel though this new year remembering that.

So these are some of the things we can learn from looking at Paul's experience on the Damascus Road. But what about the other chap in the story, Ananias ?

We know very little about him.

William Barclay calls Ananias 'one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian church'. And so I want to make sure we give a bit of time and thought to Ananias, and don't overlook him and what God might be saying to us through his part in this story.

Ananias was minding his own business in Damascus, when God called to him to do what must have been the most terrifying ordeal of his life. To go and seek out and lay hands on, and pray for a man who was a known persecutor of Christians. Not really you're average request!

#### Listen to God.

So the first thing I think Ananias helps us to bear in mind for the new year is that we should listen to God. Ananias heard God speak because he was listening. That might be very obvious, but it's true nonetheless. The times when God appears to be very silent are usually the times when we've had our fingers in our ears, metaphorically speaking; or when we've been making so much racket ourselves that we don't hear Him.

It really helps to be listening, and I don't just mean in a 'yes, dear, what ever you say' sort of way, while we continue to watch the telly or read the paper! I think God is probably as unsatisfied with that response as a stereotypically nagging wife is. (Except that God doesn't nag, so my analogy probably falls down at that point.)

In 2007 lets be committed to listening to God, both personally and as a church. I believe God has important things to say to us.

#### Be open to his calling

Secondly studying Ananias reminds us to be open to God's calling on our lives. Here God's calling to Ananias is reminiscent of God calling to Samuel, where he responded 'speak Lord, your servant is listening.' Here Ananias answers 'yes Lord'. But when he hears what God is calling him to, he doesn't like it.

At this point I imagine Ananias responding to God with a 'you must be joking' or similar sort of phrase, in a reassuringly normal and human response to being asked to do something that would be difficult and potentially dangerous.

When we hear God's call we may not like what it is, but that doesn't stop it being God's call.

In the coming year God may well call us to do things we'd rather not. I want to encourage each one of us to be open and to respond to him.

#### Trust Him for the difficult stuff

And finally, we can learn from Ananias to trust God for the difficult stuff.

Can you imagine God calling you to go and speak to, say, a terrorist who is well-known for their dislike of Christians? Ananias must have been absolutely terrified, and justifiably so, as I'm sure we would be. Yet he trusted God enough to be obedient.

I am hoping that God doesn't have such scary things in store for me this year, but each one of us will at times face things we find very difficult. With God's help and God's leading we'll get through them. 2007 can be a year of deep trust in God.

#### So what about us ?

So which of these two-Paul and Ananias- is it most helpful for us to identify with?

Paul was someone pretty special. We get the impression that from early on in his life he'd been a rising star. Occasionally we meet people like that. No wonder God met him in a special way and had a special role for him.

Perhaps you're a high flyer, particularly good at what you do. Keep your ears open for God's calling this year.

Or maybe you're sitting thinking, I'm nothing special, I'm just an ordinary guy. Well, you're in good company.

Ananias, from what we can gather was just an ordinary guy, but one who followed Christ, as many of us are. Yet God spoke to him too, and required special things of him. God calls the Paul's of this world – the high flyers. But he calls the Ananias's too- the ordinary men and women.

This morning I invite us all to come before God and commit ourselves to Him for the year ahead. Remembering to expect the unexpected, that God may have truly surprising things in store for us; being prepared for God to radically change us; knowing that nothing is too difficult for him to accomplish. And I invite each one of us to take time to listen to God, to remain open to his calling, and to trust him for the difficult things we face.

**Housegroup notes. 7.1.07**  
**Forward with Christ. Acts 9:1-22**

The account of Paul's experience on the Damascus Road is a useful one for us as we think about new beginnings at the start of a new year.

By looking at Paul and Ananias we can draw some parallels with regard to our own lives and responses to God.

This passage encourages us to:

- expect the unexpected
- know that God can radically change lives
- believe that nothing is too difficult for God
- listen to God
- be open to his call
- trust God in difficult situations

For discussion.

1. What experience have you had in meeting with Christ ? Take a few moments to think about and to tell your story ?
2. Imagine you are Paul meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road. What would you say to Jesus ?
3. Which of the points above (this passage encourages us to ..... ) do you find particularly easy? Difficult? And why ?
4. What challenges do you personally expect to face in 2007?
5. As a church community how can we listen to God this year ?