

Service Transcript

Sunday 1st May 2022

Welcome, Notices, Birthday Box

DD DD DD DD _____?

Have a look at this puzzle. What comes next? Batman.

BATMAN CLIP

COMIC STRIP WORDS

Batman originated as a comic strip in 1939 and typical of comic strips of this time came with all the usual comic strip sound effects: pow! urrgh! whoosh! kaboom! thwack! and of course, zap! which actually originated as a sound effects word from cinema.

ZAP

Today, we're using one of these as the rather unusual theme for our Communion service. Zap is a now well-used colloquial word that has come to mean a *sudden effect or event that makes a dramatic impact, especially a sudden burst of energy or sound.*

Our God is an amazing God and he is powerful and show by works of power who He is, and you don't have to go very far into the Bible to find God doing amazing things that have a dramatic affect on people and the world. And the words "zap" and "zapped" have found colloquial use in Christianity to describing an action of God where he suddenly uses powerful force to act against someone or something with the purpose of effecting sudden change e.g. SLIDE blowing up the altar on Mt Carmel the plagues of Egypt, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. More about that as we go along.

As we are thinking of a great and powerful God let's stand and testify how great our God is.

DECLARATION

Let us declare our faith in God the Creator:

in God we live and move and have our being.

***The God who made the world is Lord of heaven and earth.
He does not live in buildings we have made,
nor does he need anything we can give,
for he himself gives life and breath to all things.***

From one ancestor he made all the nations:

he set their times and places, so they would search and find him though he is not far from each of us.

God has set a day to judge the world with justice.

He has appointed Jesus Christ to be the judge, and has proved this by raising him from the dead.

This is our faith.

In God we live and move and have our being. Amen.

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Our God is great because He is creator, but our God is also great because in Christ, He is our Redeemer. Let's sing about that now in the first two songs.

1158 All my days

298 Jesus, name above all names

Prayer

829 I stand amazed

Prayers

Use Weekly Sheet

Ukraine

Lord, in Your mercy ...

Current situation in UK

Lord, in Your mercy ...

Reading Acts 9:1-19

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Sermon - Zap!

ZAP! It’s a very 20th century word, originating in the film industry as a sound effect in 1929. By 1940s it was used in comic strips for some powerful act used by the hero when fighting, such as in Batman comics. DEFINITION It’s a slang word that has developed lots of “respectable” uses usually around a *sudden effect or event that makes a dramatic impact, especially a sudden burst of energy or sound*. It has found a variety of uses in the real world since such as a fly zapper which you find in commercial kitchens; and Americans refer to microwaving food as zapping.

CARMEL

It has found colloquial use in Christianity by describing an action of God where he uses powerful force to act against someone or something with the purpose of effecting change e.g. blowing up the altar on Mt Carmel, the plagues of Egypt or the Damascus Road experience of Saul of Tarsus.

DAMASCUS ROAD

Similarly I’ve heard it used in connection with big movements of the Holy Spirit such as the coming to the Lord of over 3000 people on the Day of Pentecost. Many of the significant events in the early history of the church involved power manifestations of the Spirit. At Pentecost 3000 people were zapped – cut to the heart after hearing Peter speak, askin “what shall we do?” The rest is history.

CRISIS OF FAITH

I was brought up in a tradition that even though the conversion of Saul involved the extreme case of Saul being zapped on the Damascus Road. We were told that each conversion to Christianity should involve an encounter with God, a crisis of faith, where a person reaches a point where they are faced with the choice of accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord and following Him. Each believer will therefore have a testimony of when and how it happened.

The problem is, that isn’t the experience of most Christians, particularly ones brought up in church families, who never had a significant crisis of faith. I can remember being on a walk at my first University where I was a fresher and I got talking to a third year in the Christian Fellowship and asked him when he became a Christian. He replied that he didn’t have a clue. He was brought up in a Christian family and could never remember a time when he didn’t believe that Jesus was his Saviour. But he had no problem affirming who Jesus was, confessing his personal faith in Christ, the forgiveness of his sins, the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. It’s just that he couldn’t recall exactly when any of that became real and conscious to him. How can that be. Let me give you an illustration.

SEVERN BRIDGE If you travel to Wales over the Severn Bridge, you know where the border is. If you travel into Wales on country roads in the Marches, then you don’t sometimes don’t realise where the border is. LLANYMYNECH Where’s the border in this town?

CROWD – WE ALL JOURNEY DIFFERENTLY

In my long experience as a Christian, I’ve found that everyone has a different testimony. Some are spectacular like Saul’s, others are simple and straightforward. As we discovered when we talked

about Peter and John last week, they were equally valued and equally loved by Jesus. So are each of us who know and love Him, who trust and follow.

AN EXCEPTION RATHER THAN THE RULE? Read the NT and you fast realise that Saul was one of a kind as most of the apostles were. They had drama associated. How much drama accompanied your conversion? Not a lot I suspect – maybe your journey to faith meant spending time in the borderlands of Llanyrnedd before you settled on Jesus' side of the border.

So why was Saul's conversion so dramatic? It needed to be. Saul was a stubborn and zealous man. Verse 1 says Saul was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." He has been described as a "fanatic without compassion." In Acts 22:4 Paul says "'I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons.'" He was that bad. He was out to get Christians by fair means or foul. He had authority to detain Christians in synagogues, but Acts is unclear how he had the legal right to take people in chains to Jerusalem. There are various theories of how he thought he could achieve that and it probably meant telling a few lies and pulling in favours with King Aretas IV of the Nabateans who seems to have been ruling Damascus at the time.

How was God going to give this hard-headed man the experience of his life that would cause him to change his mind and follow Jesus? Saul needed to end up in a heap on the Damascus Road and then spend three days in temporary blindness to realise he needed to follow Jesus. We read what happened and he was totally transformed from a super-devout Jew to a passionate follower of Jesus!

Saul was confronted with a choice – follow Jesus or face God's wrath with Him and a lost eternity. It seems that the experience was shattering to Him. But there's a second thing we need to know about Saul's conversion.

VERSE

All this was the plan of God (vv-15-16): *"This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* Apart from the drama of the Damascus Road experience, this man was to be moulded from persecutor into persecuted. In the course of that someone with His abilities and knowledge would shape the church and its mission. There are some sorts of conversion experience that are necessary to create the faith and assurance needed to do the things Paul did, that's why these spectacular conversions sometimes happen, even though that isn't the experience of most believers.

THE JOURNEY IS THE SAME

We are all different and have different testimonies of our coming to faith. In one sense we are unique in our experience of God. We discovered last week, in living Christ's resurrection life, we all have our own calling and equipping of God. But don't feel you missed out on anything when you read about Paul being zapped on the Damascus Road. Never be concerned that any other Christian has a "better" testimony or experience than you. We are all of the same value to God,; we are loved dearly. The "zapped ones" aren't superior believers – they probably required being zapped because they were stubborn and hard-headed like Paul – or they need a testimony like his to effectively serve God. My advice is this: follow your call because your experience of Christ already qualifies you in every way to serve Him and it's the Spirit of God who will empower you as necessary.

ANANIAS

Now if that hasn't convinced you, there's another person in our story today who is much more like us – a regular kind of person. He was the antithesis of Paul. He was a devout Jew who had started

following Jesus. For him there was no bright light no Damascus Road experience. Nothing spectacular. We don't know anything about how he started to believe. He just did. His was a quiet testimony. There is no suggestion that he came to faith in a miraculous or dramatic way. Ananias was precisely the sort of Christian Paul was coming to arrest and return to Jerusalem with in chains. He wasn't a prominent apostle – easy to find and easy to persecute - he was living and witnessing to Christ in the synagogues uncontroversially.

Saul was committed to root out people like him, and drag back to Jerusalem, to be tried and possibly stoned to death if the Jewish leadership could find a way to do it.

But God had plans for Ananias. God was calling Ananias to do the honours on introducing Saul into the kingdom of God. Which he did faithfully if not a bit warily to start until he got the story.

WE CAN ALL BE AN ANANIAS

Whereas Pauls are rare, unusual and God uses them spectacularly, usually at a high price to them, Ananiases are very common. We are all Ananiases. We can be used by God if we allow God to lead us to our Straight Streets and find someone there who is praying and wanting to come to Jesus. In reality, the hero of our story isn't Crazy Saul who needed this horrendous thing to happen to him to make him stop and turn to Christ, but faithful Ananias who was praying, listening ready to serve in a small way, the consequences of which would be world-changing.

I believe what we should be taking out of this story today is that simple truth that God desires to use us to bring Him glory and it isn't necessarily for big gestures in service, but in patient and faithful and unspectacular service which seriously will help someone if we are prepared and ready as Ananias was. NOT EVERYONE CAN BE PAUL BUT WE ALL COULD BE ANANIAS. Let me give you the three point treatment on what we learn from Ananias

ALWAYS BE OPEN TO GOD

God met with Ananias in a vision. We are not given many details but it is clear that Ananias was open to being spoken to by God. Do we want God to use us? Then we need to spend time with Him – reading His written word, spending time in prayer, spending time with others in worship and service. Do we want God to use us afresh in these post pandemic days? Then spend time with Him and listen for his voice.

BE PREPARED TO SERVE – LITTLE IS JUST AS GOOD AS LARGE

It's one thing to be open to God speaking to you, it's quite another to be prepared. God wasn't asking much of Ananias. You can never measure service to God in terms of value. We do things in the power and the presence of the Spirit. What God wants us to do is obey. Never think yourself insignificant – you are being asked to serve the purposes of the God who created the universe and everything in it. That's huge in human terms whatever way you think of it.

BE FAITHFUL IN PRAYER – LISTEN TO GOD, NEVER SAY NO

Ananias was shocked by what he was being asked to do. Go to Saul? He's here to do harm? One aspect of our ministry that we've been challenged by in the last few months is how we respond to what God is calling us to next. It's a very human thing to look at the task and look at the resources and say to God "but we can't do this." We haven't got the people, we haven't got the skills, we don't have enough willing hands. I've heard it a lot in the last year.

Stop! Is God calling us to do something as a church? What are we discerning. I can almost guarantee most of what God is genuinely asking for us to do for Him in the coming years is out of

our comfort zones. It is the nature of God's work. If we want to move with God, then get used to feeling inadequate most of the time.

Luckily for Saul, Ananias listened carefully to what God had to say. His job was small, but it was clear that it was going to have massive consequences in coming years.

Please listen to the voice of God. Whatever He commands do. Don't say "but this" or "but that" because when God genuinely calls he equips and empowers with His Spirit. This story is a call for us to go back to basics and to the NT and remember again how God works – and to use the words of my last sermon's title "Follow Him."

THY KINGDOM COME

This all comes at a handy time. In a few weeks we will be participating in Thy Kingdom Come. We will tell you more about how we will be both praying and reaching out in the next few weeks. Let's start thinking about who God is asking you to pray for this year. Maybe it was someone who you have been praying for already; maybe it's someone new. Pray for opportunities to share Jesus with them. These are significant and scary time in which we find ourselves. Let's start to regain the confidence again to pray and act in the power of the Spirit of God as His church here at Maidstone Road.

Let's Pray CONFESSION

Father as we think on the story of Saul and Ananias this morning, we realise that it is You that raises people up to serve You and You empower them by Your Spirit to obey Your call. Please forgive us for those times when we lose that perspective and limit you to the size of our imaginations. Free us by Your Spirit into developing healthy expectations of what it means to obey and serve You. Thank you that the value of service is not in the scale of what we are called to do, but by our obedience to Your call.

As we come around the Lord's table may we know Your presence afresh as we participate in the meal You have called us to share. May Jesus have the glory through it. We ask this in His name. Amen.

1015 Thank you for saving me

Communion

Fellowship Prayers - open

309 Jesus, we celebrate Your victory

Blessing

*Almighty God,
your ascended Son has sent us into the world
to preach the good news of your kingdom:
inspire us with your Spirit
and fill our hearts with the fire of your love,
that all who hear your Word may be drawn to you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*