

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

15th April 2018

Acts 9:1-19

Spirit... may we begin where we are today... but end up in the world... May we begin here in church... but end up in the roadways of the world... that our faith does not begin and end here... but draws us... pulls us... calls us... beyond these walls... So be it... Amen

The Commonwealth Games finish today... and if you have been watching the highlights... you will probably have noticed... in the bottom right hand corner of your screen... there is often a hashtag that says 'get inspired'...

It sits there subtly... making you feel guilty... watching all these athletes... run... jump... cycle... swim... dive... etc... provoking you... "So... what are you going to do?"...

Very little if the truth be told... not that we haven't been inspired with good stories... James Heatly for example... the Scottish diver... who is the first to win a diving medal for Scotland... since his grandfather did 60 years ago... #GetInspired...

Or Evie Richards... the mountain biker who gained silver for England... having only started cycling four years ago after Glasgow's Commonwealth Games... #GetInspired...

And it is inspiring..... for other people... I just look at them... realise there is no way I will achieve what they are achieving... Indeed research after Glasgow's Games showed that most of these sporting events fail to inspire folk into any lasting exercise... because gold medal achievements are out of reach... for folk like me... I'm far more familiar with flat whites than flat stomachs...

I imagine it is not quite the idea behind it... rather just get off the sofa... and try something... anything... and you might be surprised at what ends up being possible... #GetInspired...

I can't imagine the apostle Paul... walking along the Damascus road... ever imagined what he would be inspired to do... from being the most infamous persecutor of the Christian Faith... to becoming one of its greatest advocates... winning gold medals spreading the

faith... around the known world... before anyone else had managed to get out of Jerusalem...

The issue perhaps with all of that however... is how it all began... with that strange and dramatic conversion experience somewhere between Jerusalem and Damascus... a blinding flash of light... a voice from heaven... and a miracle... If that was the norm... then we'd all be inspired by it... But it isn't how most of us got faith...

Perhaps we can reimagine this story... that it might be more inspiring for us everyday folk... in the bronze lane of faith... And note... this is just a thought experiment so don't hold too much by it...

No one has any real idea what was going on in Paul's mind... so focussed he was in persecuting the new faith...

An evangelical persecutor... zealous in his intent to eradicate those who were turning away from Judaism... his own faith... and joining The Way... this new brand of religion based on Judaism... but changing it completely... and thus everything he was brought up with...

It was a frenzied hatred... But do you ever wonder... when people are so evangelically against something... that actually... they just can't admit to themselves they agree with it...

So they suppress it... and become more zealous in eradicating it... but it gets to the stage when they can no longer avoid it... and they have a crisis and finally admit it...

I remember the moment early in university when I had to admit to the Christian Union... I didn't actually believe the bible literally... I was a hall rep for them... I was involved in a campus mission... I stood and spoke to folk about the faith... that only hell was on offer if they didn't convert... But one day... I had to admit I wasn't actually sure I believed in hell at all... or the devil...

I didn't so much leave the Christian Union... I was thrown out...

But it was like turning your back on your heritage and everything you were brought up to believe... but you just can't accept it any longer... However what happens next is you have to reinterpret... and find a broader understanding of faith...

And so perhaps we need to say to folk... we live with questions... and doubts... We don't all believe everything... and tend to find with Paul... that there is a whole new world after that moment... In fact since admitting that what we've been brought up to believe isn't always what we all think now... we've grown more honest... in our faith... #GetInspired...

But there is more to inspire us in this story... Paul... the great persecutor of the faith... who had killed many... and whose reputation was more Darth Vader than Obi-Wan Kenobi... was given space in the very faith he persecuted... The one who had been out to destroy the early church... was accepted into it...

Think about that a minute... The great Christian destroyer... was given a place to belong... a welcome... based on grace and not our past...

This is radical inclusion... such a difficult call... and the church still struggles with that... We aren't always the best at including folk... or welcoming them... and I know people will say they have found our congregation friendly... and to our guests today... especially Finlay... I hope you find not just a welcome... but a place you can call home... We try... but we're a 2000 year old institution... and we find it as difficult as any other group... to make space... and learn from others... and change our ways... but we want to...

But this is what happened to Paul on that Damascus Road... and what Paul invited the early church to do... by welcoming in Gentiles... those who weren't Jews... It caused a lot... a lot of anguish and fall outs... but Paul's generosity finally won... perhaps because he himself was accepted and included... It is a gospel imperative... and so every day... every week... it is our purpose to love our neighbour... and welcome each to their home... here... #GetInspired...

But it is perhaps one other things about this tale... that might inspire us most... Paul's three days of blindness... the same length of time Jesus was in the tomb... and that connection isn't random...

As we know... having read John's Gospel over the last few months... the idea of physical blindness is a metaphor for spiritual ignorance... and sight... is a metaphor for understanding... and we can quote plenty from the bible to illustrate that... Nicodemus... the man born blind... the Pharisees... Thomas...

The whole idea of darkness in the faith... is not lost on those of us who have found 'believing' a slow journey... those who have discovered deep periods of anxiety about the faith... with many stops and starts along the way... times when little of it makes sense... and we're hanging on by our fingertips... in the shadows... and we wonder how can others feel so certain... when we feel so lonely with our doubts...

Paul... who had to be led by the hand at times... when he had no idea what was happening... or what to think... when things he had been brought up to believe... suddenly and radically shifted... and he felt very far from what was certain...

The experience of living in faith... continually involves moments of inspiration... and desperation... periods of bright light... and of spiritual blindness... This is the reality of faith for many here... It is not all confidence and certainty... far from it... It is a mix of questions and honesty... and when what we've been brought up to believe... doesn't make sense of our experience of the world... we seek new ways to interpret faith and what it all means... which is the underlying story of the whole bible... when their faith didn't make sense of the world... they reinterpreted the stories... and found ever expanding truths... and ways of speaking of God and faith... The times of blindness.. .darkness... shaped the times of light...

Which makes church an adventure... a journey into yet unimagined and unexpected places... as Paul discovered on that everyday road... and invites us to do so... regularly... here...

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