

Acts 7:54-8:1, 9:1-19

Today we're going to focus on the reading from the Book of Acts of the Apostles. The background to what we read today is that the Jewish authorities were trying to contain or stamp out even the spread of Christianity. They believed the Christian sect were breaking the laws of God and the temple and were a threat to the true religion.

In chapter 7, we read of the stoning of Stephen. He was the first martyr of the young church. A witness to that event was a young man named Saul who looked after the over clothes his accomplices left at his feet while they were busy throwing stones at Stephen. We learn from the Book of Acts that Stephen approved of their killing of him.

We then catch up with him in chapter 9 where it says that he was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He goes to the high priest for letters allowing him to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem as prisoners. He gets the letters of recommendation and sets off on his way.

That's when everything changes. We read of a dazzling light and a voice from heaven, asking 'why do you persecute me?' This brief conversation with Jesus was just a moment – a vital one though in today's story. What ensues is a period of three days without any vision. Saul decides to fast – either as a sign of repentance or, more likely, as a tool to help him discern what has happened to him and what this Jesus vision means. He feeds on prayer only as any pious Jew would.

For three days he cannot see. How disconcerting! How disorienting! How confusing! What does it all mean? What is going to happen to him now? He needs to rely on the help of others for everything, he's away from home, he's no longer who he was but nobody knows that yet. He's not yet who he will become. He's in a limbo and can but wait. Who likes that!

And yet that's what he needs before he can embark on his new journey. That's God's wise plan to keep him blind, reliant upon others and disoriented for three days.

I believe that's where the Church is at the moment. We're in a limbo between the old and the new. We know the old isn't working any more but we don't know what to do about it and where to turn for help. We know our churches are shrinking, we know we're not attractive in any way to the younger folks, we know our old beloved ways are not appreciated by the new generations. It hurts. It confuses us as we love the Church the way it is. We long for the return of the old times when the Church was at the heart of the community, everyone flocked to it for comfort and guidance, the Church had status and authority.

I'm going to spell out a painful but important truth now – those times are not coming back. The society has changed, the times have changed and we need to find a way forward in this new reality. God is calling us to become a Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – not stubbornly sticking to our own understandings and desires but faithfully following the risen Christ where he leads.

We are in a wilderness moment – the equivalent of the blindness period for Saul. Not just this congregation, not just the Church of Scotland but the Church of Jesus Christ in the Western world is being fashioned into something as yet unknown. We're between the old and the new. We're in a period of disorientating blindness as to who we are and where we are going and what we're being

called to. We are facing challenges our upbringing and education did not prepare us for. It's not a sign that what was in the past was inadequate – simply that the world has changed and our knowledge and understanding hasn't yet caught up with it.

It's very uncomfortable. There are no easy answers. Many of us don't even want to look for answers. We long to be comforted and comfortable. And that's natural. But the voice from heaven is calling: 'Now get up and go, and you will be told what you must do.'

Before we sing again I'd like to stress that it's crucial to face up to reality before moving on. That's the principle of Alcoholics Anonymous – without admitting to the reality of your painful addiction, your weakness and inability to deal with the situation on your own you cannot be healed. Saul experienced that when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and told him that he's persecuting him. He had thought he was doing the right thing, protecting the one true religion, defending God's name, glorifying his God by stamping out Christianity. When he met Jesus, he was forced to see the world and himself in a very different light. He was persecuting the God he loved – the God he failed to recognise in Jesus Christ. He needed the wilderness period to come to terms with this whole new reality. He needed one of the hated sect to come and heal him by calling him 'Brother!'

Some of you might not agree or recognise anything I'm speaking about – I hope you draw some comfort from the prayers and the singing at least ☺ Some of you might already be in the recognition stage and feeling highly stretched in the wilderness area. Know that you are not alone. We're all in the same boat – trying to be faithful, trying to find answers. Some of you might already be excited about the new emerging Church and what God is doing in Orkney and Scotland in 2018. It is exciting indeed.

396 And can it be

What follows now is a metaphor worked out by a colleague of mine, Rev Neil Meyer from Kintore. I think it explains very well where we are now as a Church.

'Imagine an episode of Strictly Come Dancing. The contestants have spent the first three weeks dancing the waltz. They know how to waltz, and they waltz well.

But this week the music changes. Suddenly, it is a tango rhythm, and none of the contestants has ever danced (or even seen or heard!) a tango before. To make matters worse, none of the instructors has ever heard, seen or danced a tango before either. What to do?

Some of the dancers decide that since they know how to waltz, they will carry on waltzing - regardless of the music. (They will, of course, be voted out at the end of the round.)

Most of the dancers, sensing that the rhythm is different, intuitively begin to move as best they can to the new beat. Eventually they will figure out how to dance to this new music even if, for a while, they look a little bit silly and awkward.

The really smart dancers decide to take a step back, to listen carefully to the music and to work out a new set of steps for this dance.

(Can you see where this is going?)

In the Church we have been dancing the same waltz for 300, 500 or 1500 years (depending on whether you take the Enlightenment, Reformation or Constantine as your starting point). In any event, we know the waltz pretty well by now and we do it well.

But the music has changed, and if we are to survive we will have to learn how to dance to this new beat.

2 Points are helpful:

1) The change of music was not made by the minister. Neither was it a decision of the Kirk Session, or a new policy instituted by 121.

It is the world in which we live that has brought about the changes that all churches, everywhere are now facing.

2) Some churches will carry on waltzing (doing things the way they've always been done), and that may appeal (for a while) to the ageing members of their congregations until they all die out.

Most churches are sensing that things have changed and are intuitively beginning to move to the new rhythms, although for a while they may seem clumsy and awkward.'

God says in Isaiah: 'See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.' (Isaiah 43:19)

Maybe you are like Saul – in need of a watershed moment to challenge your preconceptions, your reluctance, and your fear. But maybe you are like Ananias – far more open to God's leading and therefore more ready to respond to God's call. Note that he was converted too in today's story. He was afraid for his life; he did not expect anything good to come from Saul and therefore was reluctant to go when God called upon him. But when he heard God's reassuring: 'Go!', he did. Moreover he showed such grace and love to his former enemy that is nearly unreal. He called him brother and ate with him. Thank God for such gracious openness to God's leading!

Which one are you? What do you need to follow where Jesus leads? Amen.