



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Acts 9:1-19a ("The Conversion of Paul")

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Amen.

Today's hymns

- 1 *Lord, you sometimes speak* (CH:606)
- 2 *Longing for light* (CH:543)
- 3 *Christ's is the world* (CH:724)
- 4 *I'm not ashamed* (CH:645)
- 5 *Who would true valour see* (CH:535)

In the Name of the Father and of

The story we have just heard together is one that is usually told in relation to the main character: how it happened that a feared persecutor of the earliest generation of Christians came (quite literally) to see the light; how Saul of Tarsus was turned in his tracks to become the principal leader and evangelist of the first century Church. There is, however, more than one way to tell a story, so today we are going to look at it from the viewpoint of a man who quickly flits into the Book of Acts, before flitting back out again. First though, let's consider this man from Turkey who went (originally) by the name of Saul. Here's a man who had long been a passionate advocate of the Jewish faith and who would stop at nothing to keep his religion secure from any kind of threatening influence. He was, it seems, particularly wary of those who had become known as "the people of the Way" – those upstart Christians who claimed that a carpenter's son was nothing less than the promised Messiah.

In our reading from Acts chapter 9 we are told that Saul was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord". He planned to go to Damascus and track down Christians who might be trying to sow dissent in the synagogue. And if he were to any such offenders, he would have them unceremoniously dragged back to Jerusalem for prosecution. And so it was that Saul set off on his mission to Damascus, ready to find those Christians and make them pay a heavy price for their falsehoods.

But as with so many of the best laid plans, this one didn't work out quite as expected. Blinded on the road to Damascus, he heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

And that is where this other character flits into the story: Ananias.

With Saul waiting sightless in the city, this unsuspecting Damascus Christian receives a deeply troubling message from God. He is told that Saul has been sent a vision of a man coming to restore his sight. That man is Ananias who, quite naturally, is very deeply worried – and with good reason. Ananias knows just enough about Saul to understand that he would rather not be in the same city as him, far less be in the same room.

"Lord," he replies, "I have heard from many about this man."

And what he has heard has well and truly filled him with a terrible fear. We don't know what Ananias has been told, but we can probably get a good sense of it from other biblical writings. Looking back on his early life, Paul (that is, the renamed Saul) would be adamant about the kind of fiery character he had once possessed. This was someone whose terrible passion had all too readily been brought to bear against the emerging Christian community. Writing to the Philippian Church some years after the events of this morning's reading, he described himself as someone, "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." [*Philippians 3:5, emphasis added.*]

For Ananias, his call from God must have been like getting an invitation to swim naked among sharks (the big, ugly kind of sharks with the rows and rows of pointy teeth); or like receiving a request to wander into the big cats' enclosure at the zoo wearing a t-shirt with the word "DINNER" printed in big, bold letters for any literate lion to read and understand.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

No surprise then that Ananias tries his best to bargain his way out of his calling. He has heard what other people have been saying about this character named Saul. He has heard of the evil ways – not just harsh or wicked but positively “evil” ways – with which Saul has acted in Jerusalem. The man’s reputation is out there, so Ananias knows well enough that to enter any house where Saul is staying is to step into a minefield. It won’t likely end well.

But all credit to Ananias. He doesn’t refuse God. He doesn’t hide away. He doesn’t flee from this crazy calling. Instead, Ananias listens when God says this to him:

Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

“Go,” says God ... and “go” is exactly what Ananias does. And that’s the strange thing about a true calling. While reason tells you that it makes no sense to say “yes”, deep down inside your quivering frame you feel there is a new direction that just has to be taken because – despite all the sensible counter-arguments despite the sheer, unadulterated ridiculousness of it all – you are convinced that it is *God* who is doing the calling.

And so Ananias says “yes”. Saul is set free from blindness. And the rest is church history.

Has God ever called *you* to somewhere new, to do something special or dangerous? Have you ever had a nagging fascination over *something* that just persists, in spite of all your inner misgivings? You might say a polite, “No, that’s not for me,” but the call keeps on pushing ... pushing ... pushing you away from where you are, making you feel like you *have* to act. With God calling, you find yourself answering, “Here I am.”

Be in no doubt: Ananias is far from unique. Many faithful people down through the ages have heard the unmistakable call of God and have struggled with it before facing up to the task to which they have very personally been called. We see it all across the pages of the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, the boy Samuel. Each one heard and responded, perhaps with hesitancy but ultimately with courage. Even Jesus himself wrestled with his sense of call, first in that early wilderness of temptation, then much later in the grief of Gethsemane.

So even Jesus struggled. Yet, as we know: “... not *my* will, but *yours* ...”.

When it comes to God’s call there are risks and there are often costs. Never forget those countless, nameless missionaries who hundreds of years ago would leave these shores for distant parts of the globe where harsh climate and incurable disease would stalk them day by day. They would take with them a few possessions packed not in their suitcase, but in their coffin, a constant reminder to them of what might well lie in wait for them as they headed out in faith. These were dedicated folk with a profound sense of calling.

And in our own day we have seen people who have sensed an undeniable call to serve God in one way or another, not just as missionaries and ministers, but as charity workers, foodbank trustees, night shelter volunteers, care home visitors, justice campaigners, climate activists, lay pastors. They do what they do because of their God-given calling.

In these difficult days for the Church, locally, regionally and nationally, where is God calling *us*? Let us be open, and let us – just like Ananias – be responsive to the call.

Watch and pray. Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the ages,
in this time of great suffering and uncertainty, we recall before you
children and young people whose lives have been disrupted so much:
tiny infants who have known nothing but pandemic living;
girls and boys unable to enjoy the freedoms which would have meant so much;
teenagers whose schooling has been sporadic, at best;
young people with deep anxieties about their future;
university and college students fearful of joining the jobs market.

Bless each one we pray, so that they might know you are there for each and for all.

Help every young person see that life has a purpose,
even in the most troubling of times.

Guide each one towards building community in new and wonderful ways,
where they might realise the power of your great love among them.

In all of this, we ask that you would be with us your Church:
a community of faith able and willing to be true neighbours
to all in need, both young and old alike.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers the 2021 General Assembly:

The General Assembly of 2021 was like no other – all online and with many meaty topics. Each congregation is asked to send its minister and one elder as “commissioners” to the Assembly every three or four years and this year was the turn of Gladsmuir linked with Longniddry. I was fortunate enough to be our elder representative. I also attended the 2018 General Assembly.

I find it fascinating (and sometimes frustrating). There were several issues that were discussed this year that were also discussed in 2018! Sometimes progress can feel a tad slow. But maybe this pace ensures engagement of everyone in the Church and allows us all to absorb and get used to change. On the other hand, such a stately pace can mean events overtake us and we are left well behind.

There were many very significant issues for the Church that came up this year. One was the permission for ministers to conduct marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples. The Legal Questions Committee (it seems improbable a committee with such a name could deliver such an important report) informed us that Church law could be changed to allow ministers to apply for a licence to marry same-sex couples and that no minister would be obliged to make such an application. Now Presbyteries will be asked to give their views on whether such a change in Church law should be made. If they agree then the Assembly of 2022 will be asked to approve such a change in Church law. If that happens then maybe, just maybe, same sex couples could be married in some Church of Scotland churches next summer. I for one would welcome that.