

## **Hinde Street Methodist Church**

15 September 2019 11am

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Paul's conversion story, which he is referring to in the letter to Timothy, was a rather dramatic one. And he recognises that he was completely dependent on the grace of Christ Jesus. He sees himself as a great example to others of how the love of God in Christ can be transformative, and how God's mercy and grace can save even Paul – who, as Saul, once held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death. If even he could be rescued then anyone can be – that is Paul's message.

Stephen, by the way, was called to the role of deacon – to go out into the community and respond to the needs of those on the margins of society. Let me just say, this deacon is very grateful for a much more friendly and welcoming reception than Stephen had!! Although, I guess its early days still!!

Paul, though, could well understand the shepherd's action and the woman's from those 2 parables that Jesus shared. Because he could identify with the lost sheep and the lost coin, and since his conversion he spent his whole life in search of those who are lost.

We will all have our own stories of how we came to faith – whether they are as dramatic as Paul's, or quite the opposite, or somewhere in-between. They are all important and are all relevant to us as individuals. God uses ways of searching us out and reaching each of us as individuals, ways that are appropriate to our characteristics and our needs at the time.

During my sabbatical just a few months ago, I used the time to reflect on my own story of coming to faith, of being found and saved by Jesus.

It was 30 years ago, in 1989. I was working for a bank, had been doing for 10 years, but had moved away from my home town of Retford so was working in a different branch, with people I didn't know. I was very unhappy and felt very lost in the world.

I was one year into an unhappy marriage that eventually failed, I was very lonely and had no real direction in my life.

It was a colleague, Jan, who had kind of taken me under her wing as a newcomer, who recognised this sadness in my life – she was a Christian and she invited me to go to a Christian event with her. I went along with her, having no idea what it was going to be like and not having any expectations. But, when the alter call came at the end I felt I needed to go forward but only did so after being prompted by Jan.

There was no crash of thunder, no drama, no physical changes, no emotional changes really – just simply feeling that I needed to make this commitment.

In my sadness and loneliness a follower of Christ sought me out. She showed care and concern when I needed it, she helped to set me on the path to where I am now and I will be forever grateful to her.

When I reflect back on those times I see someone who was very vulnerable, and I firmly believe that it was only in that

state of vulnerability that I could begin to hand my life over to God.

I struggled with 'being a Christian', I just couldn't get to grips with what it meant, what I should be doing, how I should live my life. My family aren't church goers so I knew very little about Jesus, and all the stories from the Bible I'd learnt about were through assemblies in primary school.

I quite enjoyed assemblies, not because of the Bible stories, but because I enjoyed acting and some of us would act out different stories from the Bible. We tended to be left on our own to work out how to do it, though. I remember when I played John the Baptist, the scene of his death was a challenge – I was quite determined that we could this – I had an idea - the solution involved a large jumper and a football. We did however forget to put a basket in place to catch the 'head' and so inevitably when the pretend axe came down and John's head fell, it went bouncing all over the school hall. So, the beginning of my journey of faith was not easy and although I had an awareness that God existed and I remembered stories (probably for the wrong reasons), I didn't really feel that I had a personal relationship with Jesus.

I thought that going to a church would help me learn how to be a Christian, so I started going to a Methodist Church where a friend of mine went. I really did think 'being a Christian' was mainly to do with going to church on a Sunday morning, and nothing that I learnt at church at that time told me otherwise. I became rather disillusioned by church and didn't go very often, and as my marriage continued to go downhill I very rarely went. So I wasn't at church much when the new probationer minister arrived – he didn't really come into the picture until the

following year when, after much persuading by friends at church for me to be a steward, I made the decision to commit to becoming a member, more out of a sense that I needed to belong than actually to commit myself to the Methodist Church, and so I began going to membership classes led by that minister. The minister who I would eventually marry, but that's another story....

And the weeks, months and years since, it has been a steady movement forward in faith, with a number of steps backwards too, I must add.

The day following my conversion, my experience of being found, I phoned my Methodist friend back home! I wanted to share my news with her – but I wasn't ready for her reaction. Yes, she was pleased for me, but she expressed a regret that she hadn't had any such experience herself. Her parents were both Methodists so she had that particular upbringing and went to church every week – it was just part of her life. From my perspective that was better than my experience as she had known Jesus all her life, and I was just starting to learn about him. But we shouldn't compare our own experiences with those of others – God uses different ways to reach us, because we are all different.

You may know the story of John Newton, who wrote the words of the hymn Amazing grace. Steve Turner's book 'Amazing Grace' is partly the story of Newton's life and how he came to write that hymn, and partly the story of the song itself. It makes for an interesting read.

Newton's conversion, as Steve Turner recounts, came in a very dramatic way while he was on one of his voyages to trade

in slaves. In his young life he had persecuted Christians, behaved appallingly, blasphemed, encouraged others to follow his ways. There had been times when he believed, when he tried to live the life of a Christian, but he would always slip back into his previous behaviour.

During this particular voyage there was a terrific storm and several times John thought his death was imminent. It was in the storm, while he was at the wheel trying to steer the ship through it, that he prayed – not a prayer of repentance, but more like the cry of a raven, he reflected.

He reasoned that the best way forward was to ask for the power of the Spirit and then to start acting as though the gospel was true. The proof would be in the living. He felt that only by catching a vision of his wretched self as helpless did God's grace seem so appealing, so amazing.

This was the beginning of a process rather than a moment of illumination where every question was answered, every bad character trait straightened out, every problem resolved. His faith was essentially the faith that he was going to be given faith. Newton said, 'I concluded that though I could not say from my heart that I believed the gospel, yet I would for the present take it for granted, and that by studying it in this light I should be more and more confirmed in it.'

John Newton was to go on to become a clergyman and to inspire and help his young friend William Wilberforce in his campaign to abolish slavery.

In his experience of coming to faith he had found consolation in the conversion of Paul, who like him, was convinced that he

was 'the chief of sinners' because he had attacked the faith of Christians.

Paul, or Saul, had an experience that was very dramatic and it had an immediate impact on his way of living. That certainly wasn't John Newton's experience, nor mine!

Once Saul's eyes had been opened, he began his preaching. His fierce energies that had been employed in persecuting the followers of the Jesus Way, were then redirected into seeking out people for Christ. His complete commitment and intense personality would have helped shape him into the authoritative and convincing preacher that he became. He travelled far and wide taking the gospel to the Gentiles and would have had a hand in leading many people to Christ.

But, in his experience he needed the help of someone else to make that first step, someone who had been sent by God to fulfil that role. Ananias was obedient, even in the face of danger – he took a huge risk in that obedience, going to the man who had been persecuting people like himself. It was only when Ananias visited Saul that his eyes were opened, physically and spiritually.

My Ananias was Jan, the one who was obedient to God in seeking the lost – and I still keep in touch with her. She was the shepherd for this lost sheep, she was the woman for this lost coin. We all need, and are all called to be, the Ananias's in God's world. And my life has changed greatly since my first experience of being found.

Our God is a searching God, seeking out the lost, and wants us, calls us, to do the same. Not to convert – that's for God to

do. As a chaplain in a Men's Drop-in in Edinburgh I was told by one of the guys who was a committed Christian in the Baptist tradition, that I should be going round all the men converting them – he saw that as my role. I believe that's God's role. We, as disciples of Christ, are called to follow the example of Jesus and instead seek out the lost and lonely, spend time in their company, eat with them, listen to their stories, and share the good news, tell them about Jesus and how he's changed our lives.

And we can invite them to worship and other church events. That's what Jan did for me. And so we need to ensure we can provide the right environment not just for people to feel welcome as they step through the door, but a place where they can really sense the presence of God, where they can learn about God, where they can be filled with hope and experience what it means to be loved, forgiven, and renewed. Where their relationship with God can be nurtured. A place where they can feel 'I once was lost, but now am found'.

Our God is a searching God, continually seeking us out each time we go astray. We are all sinners. Yet we have the hope in Christ Jesus that each time we go astray, each time we sin, and each time we repent, we are forgiven and we are renewed, and we are welcomed by God back into the fold. And there is rejoicing in heaven. Amen.