

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts 9: 1 - 19

'In the year 1066 occurred the other memorable date in English history, viz William the Conqueror, Ten Sixty six. This is also called the Battle of Hastings, and was when William 1 (1066) conquered England at the battle of Senlac (Ten Sixty-Six)' (From 1066 And All That: W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman)

So reads one of my favourite books – 1066 And All That – the famous satire on English history. Of course, the first memorable date is when history begins – the visit of Julius Caesar to our shores.

'The other memorable date': today's story is rather similar. The Acts of the Apostles could be described as having two memorable stories. First, there's the day when the church's story begins – the Day of Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, and then there's the other story that everyone knows – the conversion of St. Paul on the way to Damascus. It's a story that has seeped into our culture. We talk about a 'Damascus Road experience' meaning a total change of heart. We might say, 'I've seen the light' or had a 'light bulb experience' to describe a new revelation.

Without any doubt, Paul's conversion is an amazing story. What a difference one event can make! Paul was a menace to the early church. He was there, giving his approval, when Stephen was murdered. Then we read; "Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."

As we open chapter 9, we are met with these words; "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." He was intent on ensuring that the church did not spread.

It was probably several days into his journey to Damascus that his famous conversion happened. All of a sudden, a brilliant light flashed around Saul. It was so bright, that he would say it was brighter than the sun. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice say, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'

Saul's response was simple yet genuine. He replied with a question: 'Who are you?'

He must have been terrified. In one brief instant, as Jesus makes himself known to him, Saul realises that everything he has ever held dear has to be re-examined. He

must have feared for his life. A devout Hebrew, a Pharisee by training, he had made it his mission to eradicate the church, wiping the followers of Jesus off the face of the earth. But now, faced with the awesome reality that Jesus truly is alive, he must have wondered how God would treat him. Is this payback time? But punishment doesn't come. Instead, there is not only forgiveness, but a commission for the future. 'Get up, go into the city, and you will be told what to do.'

Saul the persecutor is transformed into Paul the apostle. Saul, whose whole life has been wedded to the law of Moses suddenly realises that a whole new way has opened up for a living relationship with God. By grace, God calls us to a personal faith, through Jesus who died and rose to life again.

As he is led into Damascus, blinded by his experience, Saul must have learned a new humility. From now on, he was totally reliant upon God. We meet him praying, and waiting upon God for the next step. And God uses Ananias to deliver this. It is thanks to the godly ministrations of Ananias that Saul is welcomed into the church. This too is miraculous. The man who was expected to bear down on the Christians and condemn them to death suddenly turns up in their midst. And far from condemning him, the first words that Saul hears from a Christian are 'Brother Saul' – words of affirmation and acceptance. We must thank God for the faith and obedience of Ananias.

Immediately, Saul regains his sight and is baptized. God has spoken to him. Saul has responded. The key player has been granted a free transfer into the Christian team and put into position for the next stage of the spread of the gospel.