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January 25th: Acts 9:1-22 & John 12:20-50

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The conversion of St Paul the Apostle. Greeks come to Jesus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Acts 9 verses 1-22 Why are you persecuting me? And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one.

Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they let him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Here I am, Lord.

And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold 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 at Jerusalem.

And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, 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 he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God. And all who heard him were amazed, and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem, of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. Today is the feast of the conversion of St Paul the Apostle, and so we're taking a break from our study of Genesis to look for one day at Luke's account of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9 verses 1-22.

Having a yearly commemoration of such events is not designed to bind people's consciences, but rather to give us the opportunity to reflect and recall the fact that these are historical occurrences of deep importance to the history of the church. Our faith is based not upon abstract ideas, but upon historical occurrences. And this story is so important for the book of Acts that it is told in various forms on three separate occasions.

On this occasion it's directly narrated as an event within the story, whereas on later occasions it's recalled as an event in testimony before leaders and rulers. The call and conversion of Saul precedes Peter's instigation of the Gentile mission in the chapter that follows. It's one of the pieces that's being put in place for that mission.

Acts chapters 8 and 9 involve missions initiated by people other than the apostles. Philip goes to Samaria and later Saul will go to Damascus. These are then verified by the apostles.

In chapters 8, 9 and 10 of the book of Acts, Philip, Saul and Peter are all sent on missions and involve the conversions of unexpected persons. Philip and the conversion of the Samaritans, the story of Saul being converted himself, and Peter going to Cornelius. Philip also goes to the Ethiopian eunuch.

In these cases we could perhaps see the three families of humanity being reached in some way. The Ethiopian eunuch is a descendant of Ham, Saul a descendant of Shem, and then Cornelius a descendant of Japheth. The story of the conversion of Saul involves a number of details that stand out to us.

Ananias is an important character within it. The story is told from two perspectives. From the perspectives of two characters who must be joined together, both of whom have things that need to be overcome.

Saul needs to overcome his opposition to the church and Ananias needs to overcome his fear of the persecutor Saul. The church struggles to keep up with God's action. Ananias is an example of someone who, though a faithful Christian, fails to initially believe that God could convert this persecutor of the church.

But yet God has done just that and God is going to use this particular character to be the one who pioneers the next stage of the mission. Saul is described as a key character. He is someone who is a chosen instrument.

He will perform a special mission. He will bring light to the Gentiles. And he is someone who is specifically set apart for a purpose that's not just the average calling of the disciple of Christ.

He is someone who has to perform something that is unique. Like the apostle Peter, he is someone who will open key doors that will bring the mission of Christ into the realm of the Gentiles. His mission is declared in advance to give us some anticipation of the importance of what's taking place here.

The conversion of Saul is also told in a way that brings back various other parts of scriptural memory. We may think originally of the story of Jesus' own baptism. The heavens are opened and light comes down.

There is a voice coming from heaven. In both of these cases, there are similarities with the story of Jesus and his baptism. He is then praying in the house.

He is fasting for three days, going without food and drink. Maybe themes connected with Christ's death and resurrection here as well. He is appointed to a particular mission.

The Holy Spirit comes upon him. He is baptised. He takes food and is strengthened.

And then immediately he goes and speaks in the synagogue, declaring Christ to be the Son of God. The same thing that Christ was tested about in the story of Luke. And people are amazed and say, is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of all those who called upon this name? In the same way as they are astonished at Jesus' teaching and say, is not this the carpenter's son? In both of these cases, there are similarities that can be observed.

There are questions about this person's identity. In both cases, there is an attempt to kill this person. And in the story of Christ, they try and cast him down off the steep cliff.

And then in the story of Saul, the people in Damascus try to kill him. So he has to be lowered down over the walls of the city. These stories then have similarities.

And the similarities, I think, point to a deeper resemblance between these two characters. Christ is anointed by the Spirit for mission. He is set apart.

The heavens are opened. A voice comes from heaven. He is baptised.

He is tested. He eats food. And he is strengthened, then speaks directly in the synagogue.

People marvel at his teaching. They wonder who he is. And then there is an attempt to kill him.

He is delivered from that and he goes out and continues his mission. The similarity then is suggesting that the disciple is like his master. Saul is like Christ.

And as he is set apart in this event, he is set apart to be one who bears the name of Christ. Not just in teaching about Christ, but someone who suffers with Christ. He must suffer for Christ's name.

And that suffering for Christ's name connects Saul with Christ. This mission that he has to undertake is one that he will find himself filling up the measure of Christ's suffering for his church. And so from the very outset of it, he is cast in the mould of Christ.

In his baptism, in his calling, in all these other events that associate with it. A further set of comparisons can be found in the Old Testament story of David being pursued by Saul. This story is one that offers a number of fertile connections with the story of Saul in the New Testament.

Saul is like his namesake in the Old Testament, a Benjamite. He is someone who pursues and seeks to attack the Davidic king. The man who is set apart from the tribe of Judah.

He is someone who has many other similarities. We can see Christ's statement to Saul, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Is similar to the sort of question that David asks of Jonathan concerning his father's actions. What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? In a previous chapter, we see similarities between the two Saul's.

In the way that Saul goes to pursue David to Naath in Ramah. And the spirit of God comes upon him on the road and he prophesies until he comes to Naath in Ramah. And he strips off his clothes, prophesies before Samuel, lies naked all that day and all that night.

And people say is Saul also among the prophets? There are similarities then between the way that God arrests these two persecutors, these two pursuers in their tracks. And puts his spirit upon them. In the case of King Saul, this is short-lived.

But in the case of Saul the Apostle, it ends up completely transforming his life and changing his directions. Other similarities can be seen in the way that David is pursued by Saul. And he is let down through a window by Michael and escapes.

And a similar thing happens to Saul after his conversion. He is let down through a gap in the wall of Damascus in a basket and escapes when they are guarding the gates. That pursuit of Saul can remind us of the pursuit of David and his escape from Saul.

And there is a switch of the characters here. The king who pursued the line of the tribe of Judah is now changed to one who is converted. And takes on the character of his new master.

He is a true servant of the king. And as a result, he is trying to escape as King David did. No longer the persecutor but the one who is being pursued.

And as we go further in the book of Acts, we can see that this is a theme that is being explored in various ways. Shortly after his name is changed in chapter 13, Saul, or now Paul, delivers a sermon in which he talks to the men of Israel and recounts the history. All this took about 450 years.

And after that he gave them judges and told Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king and God gave them Saul, the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin for 40 years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will.

Of this man's offspring, God has brought to Israel a saviour, Jesus, as he promised. And there seems to be a connection here. Saul is the king who is removed in order that David, from whom comes the Messiah, will come on the scene.

So Saul being replaced by David, that is a theme that is at play within the book of Acts. And it might help us to understand why in that same passage there's a shift from Saul to Paul. And that switch of names draws our mind back to that replacement, the changing of the character of Saul.

So in conclusion, I would like for you to reflect upon the question of the ways in which Luke explores the connection between these two characters named Saul. Particularly in chapter 13, where there are a number of ways in which these things are worked together. Think also about the parallels and the contrast between the character of Bar-Jesus or Elimas, the magician, in chapter 13, and the character of Saul, or now Paul, the apostle.

What are some of the things that we learn about Paul's identity through chapter 13 and his connection with Saul? John chapter 12, verses 20-50. Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus.

Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.

If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him. Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.

Father, glorify your name. Then a voice came from heaven, I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again. The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered.

Others said, An angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered, This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world, now will the ruler of this world be cast out, and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So the crowd answered him, We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man? So Jesus said to them, The light is among you for a little while longer.

Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him. So that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe.

For again, Isaiah said, He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them. Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue.

For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

And Jesus cried out and said, Jesus said, John chapter 12 verse 20 tells us of some Greeks who had come to worship at the feast of Passover. The exact identity of these Greeks is not entirely clear.

Perhaps they were part of the diaspora, or perhaps they were actual Gentiles. I think it's most likely that they were actual Gentiles. These men come to Philip from Bethsaida in Galilee and tell him that they want to see Jesus.

Why did they come to Philip? Philip has a Greek name. He comes from a region, Bethsaida in Galilee, where there is a lot more interaction between Jews and Gentiles. Someone who perhaps was more distant from the elites, and as a result would be more approachable.

Philip then goes and tells Andrew, and Andrew and Philip go and tell Jesus. And this movement, when they're spreading news, going from one to another, and moving towards Jesus, is reminiscent perhaps of what we see at the end of chapter 1, although working in a different direction. The movement here is towards Jesus, rather than going out to tell others about him.

Greeks are being drawn to Jesus. And this is a sign that the hour has come that Jesus should be glorified. Jesus' death is presented in almost natural terms here, as a grain dying and rising to produce much fruit.

The way that the death and resurrection of Christ are connected within the Gospel of John is often interesting and surprising. It's presented as a sort of birth event, following after pangs. It's presented as a grain of wheat falling into the ground and then coming up to new life with fruit.

It's presented as Christ laying down his life as he has authority to take it back up again. So the death is in order for the resurrection. And here the arrival of the Greeks seems to serve as a sign that Christ's hour has come.

When the nations start to arrive, he must be lifted up. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to myself. This is a fulfilment of prophecies typically related to the temple or to the mountain of God.

For instance, in Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1 to 4, the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it. And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations and he shall decide disputes for many peoples and

they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The Greeks are then in anticipation of what's to come, a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

There's no mention of a voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism or on the Mount of Transfiguration in John, but there is a voice from heaven here. The voice declares that the Father will glorify his name and has already glorified it. The theme of glory, again, is an important one within this chapter.

Jesus speaks of his death and resurrection as his glorification and there is a sort of double entendre in the statement that he is going to be lifted up. He's lifted up on the cross, but he's also lifted up in authority and rule and that connection between the death of Christ and his exaltation is particularly distinct within the Gospel of John. You do not see that to quite the same extent in the other Gospels where there's a movement down and then up, whereas in John, the lifting up occurs at the cross itself.

Christ speaks about himself also as the light, a light that will be among them for just a little while longer and they should walk while they have the light rather than in darkness. Having Jesus with them at this point, it's important that they believe in response to him. And Jesus goes on to speak about the failure of people to respond in reflecting upon the prophecy of Isaiah, Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? This is a verse from the great chapter 53, a chapter which is often used to reflect upon Christ from the Old Testament.

He then brings them back to perhaps one of the most classic texts within Jesus' ministry, within Isaiah, referring to Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 6 and the fact that people have their eyes blinded, hearts hardened, they cannot see with their eyes or understand with their heart. The Gospel of John tells us that Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Now, whose glory? Spoke of whom? It's referring to Christ.

What is the glory that he saw? Well, in chapter 6, it's the Lord high and lifted up. It's the Lord whose glory fills the temple. Even in this chapter where the theme of glory is quite prominent, to connect the glory of Christ with that glorious theophany is a remarkable thing.

What is being said here is that Jesus is the one that Isaiah saw high and lifted up. In some ways, in the Old Testament, we see Christ as a silhouette, a figure who is presented in these great theophanies. We can see Ezekiel's vision in chapter 1 or the vision of Moses in chapter 33 and 34 of Exodus or this event that John recalls in Isaiah chapter 6. What John and the other Gospel writers are saying then is that Jesus is this one, the one whom you did not necessarily know in the Old Testament, the one in whom the glory of God was seen, now has come in person.

We know his name. We have interacted with him directly. And this is the one whose

glory is declared.

But the authorities fail to believe in him. And even when they do believe, as some do here, they do not confess it because they're afraid of the Pharisees and being cast out of the synagogue. And again, the theme of glory comes up.

They love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. Perhaps there's some double entendre here as well. The glory that comes from God is Jesus Christ.

And it's also the honour that comes from God. Jesus challenges people at this point and shows them the way that he is the dividing line by which things will be judged. He has come into the world as light so that people can be freed from the darkness and enter into the light.

But yet, if people do not obey his word, he's not going to be the one that judges them. Rather, he occasions the judgment. He is the one whose word will judge them on the last day.

They have seen the light. They have been exposed to the truth. And yet, if they have rejected that, they have no excuse left.

The fact that some would prefer not being excluded from the synagogues by the Pharisees over being honoured by Christ on the last day is a terrifying and sobering exposure of just how misplaced our priorities often are. A question to reflect upon. In chapter 12, John continues to explore key themes that pervade his gospel.

Light, glory, judgment, authority, witness, commandment and other such themes that can be found throughout the book. Now would be a good time to reflect upon some of the ways in which these themes have been developed to this point. To try and draw together some of the threads from the various chapters that we have read.

And to think about some of the deeper thrust of these themes as they have been played out.