

Conversion of St. Paul, January 26th 2009

Revd. Dr. Michael Beasley, Tutor in Mission

In 1967, a young scientist called Jocelyn Burnell was studying for a PhD in astronomy here in Cambridge. Her job was to operate a radio telescope and to analyze more than 120 meters of chart paper produced by the telescope every four days. After doing this for a number of weeks, something extraordinary happened. Jocelyn noticed that on each 120 metre sheet, 2 and a half centimetres of what she termed “scruff” or interference would be found regularly to appear. Interference on such charts is a normal occurrence and usually follows a regular 24 hour cycle – the firing up of power stations, the chimes of Big Ben, the sound of people complaining about Federation worship, that kind of thing. Burnell’s great insight was to see that the inference occurred not every 24 hours – the time taken for the Earth’s rotation to return to the same point with respect to the sun, but every 23hours and 56 minutes – the time taken for the Earth’s rotation to return to the same fixed position relative to the stars. By this, Bell knew that the interference she was seeing was of no human origin and indeed she at first dubbed the source "Little Green Man 1" – thinking she had perhaps identified alien radio waves. However, it was quickly decided that what Burnell had seen was not men from outer space but a new category of star – a pulsar – a star composed entirely of neutrons and resulting from the gravitational collapse of a massive star during a supernova event.

I find the idea of such a discovery absolutely extraordinary. Imagine having the brilliance, insight and understanding to see from a tiny smudge on a very long sheet of paper, to the possibility of a new kind of star. What an awesome, amazing, wonderful thing it was for Jocelyn Burnell to have had such vision.

The theme of vision is central to the reading we’ve heard tonight from Acts as we celebrate the feast of the conversion of Paul. What’s surprising is that this text doesn’t speak about conversion at all – the word doesn’t get used in the 22 verses we listened to. What the reading does talk about is vision – of what it means not to see, of what it means to see and of what it means to witness – and its about these themes that I’d like to speak tonight.

There’s certainly plenty of “not seeing” going on. A bursting flash of light hits the party travelling to Damascus – Saul does not know, and he can’t see, to whom he is talking, the men with whom Saul is travelling hear the voice but don’t see either, when Saul gets up from the ground he is physically blinded. When asked to go and see the stricken Saul, Ananias is distinctly iffy about what he’s being asked to do – he doesn’t see the possibilities of what is being presented to him.

It might give us pause for thought to consider who these people are that aren’t seeing – Saul – as we heard this morning in Philippians - circumcised on his 8th day, Israelite by race, of the tribe of Benjamin, a hebrew, a Pharisee, by the law’s standard of righteousness without fault, and so on. The same might well have said about the people with him. Ananias is named as one of Jesus’s

disciples in Damascus. All these people – for all their backgrounds, their religious identity and learning – do not see what Jesus is doing. And Jesus's action is hardly on the scale of fuzz 2.5cm long on a sheet of 120m. Rather Jesus's action in the realms of glorious technicolour – flashing light, a voice from heaven, clear instructions. Might our response to this story be an enhanced awareness of our ability, for all our faith and religious learning “not to see”? Might we respond to Acts by asking for a growth in humility that asks the Lord to help us see, overcome our blindness and all too frequent lack of vision.

Thankfully for Saul, not seeing is succeeded by seeing. His vision is enabled in a number of ways– firstly the Lord himself says “I myself will show him all that he must go through for my name's sake”. Secondly, his sight is enabled through the action of Ananias who says “Saul, my brother – the Lord Jesus has sent me to you so that you may recover your sight” – thirdly Saul's sight is enabled through the indwelling of the Spirit of God – Ananias says “be filled with the Holy Spirit” and the scales fall from Saul's eyes.

There's much that might be said about all this. What fascinates me particularly is the interaction between Saul and Ananias – two men who must surely have perceived themselves to be bitterest enemies – Saul, the man who at the start of our story was breathing murderous threats against the disciples and was travelling to Damascus to arrest Ananias and his friends. Ananias, who must have viewed Saul with repugnance and horror as a religious maniac thug. Yet through another with whom they think they have nothing in common, both men are enabled to see – Saul's eyes are opened, Ananias sees that the Lord's purposes can be very large and utterly surprising indeed.

If you were fortunate to attend Jean Vanier's talk in Great St Mary's last term you will have been struck by his statement that “we are healed by those we consider to be different”. What Saul's story teaches us is that part of that healing is the enabling of our vision. When was the last time your eyes were opened by someone you thought to be different – the atheist, the Muslim, the conservative evangelical, the beggar on the street, the other? When do you remain sightless because you find it inconceivable that the other could have anything helpful to say to you, let alone open your eyes?

Finally, what becomes clear in the story is that Jesus's purpose doesn't just stop at sight and vision, it goes beyond those gifts to lead to witness. On receiving his sight, Saul goes on to be baptised and “without delay” proclaims Jesus publicly in the synagogues. And while he might have had trouble in seeing the big picture of Jesus on meeting with him on the road to Damascus, he is now enabled to witness to the magnitude of Jesus's significance for the world. That as he will write in Galatians, that Jesus is the saviour for Jew and Greek, slave and free person, male and female. That as he will say in Colossians, that Jesus is the saviour who is the image of the invisible God, through whom everything on heaven and on earth was created, who exists before all things and in whom all things hold together. Such witness is not without cost – Paul's proclamation of the truth sets him on a collision course with the powers of the world to whom he speaks, and as his other writings

proclaim, the consequence of his witness is inevitably suffering and persecution.

How does your sight of Jesus result in witness? Is it “without delay” or distinctly reticent? Is it of limited perspective or cosmic proportion? Does your witness cause no trouble to anyone else, or does it make trouble for the powers of this world and as a result, for yourself?

I began this evening, by talking about Jocelyn Burnell who from a tiny smudge on a sheet of paper had the vision to see a star, and who by so doing, changed our perspective on the universe forever. The blinding of Saul and the subsequent opening of his eyes enabled him to see Jesus the true light that has come into the world, the creator of the stars and all that is. Such sight enabled Saul to witness to Jesus’s significance for the entire cosmos – seeing Jesus meant that for him, nothing was ever the same again. As we celebrate Saul’s conversion, what might we say about our vision of the Lord – our “not seeing”, seeing and witness?

I conclude by repeating the words of the collect for this day:

*Almighty God,
who caused the light of the gospel
to shine throughout the world
through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul:
grant that we who celebrate his wonderful conversion
may follow him in bearing witness to your truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*