

I had a dream earlier this month:

A Vicar at the front of the church was about to invite the people to come and take bread and wine, when he saw a vision. The image of Jesus in the stained glass window became real, alive.

The vicar said: 'People don't want the **real** Jesus, because he will deal with their sins and change them. Will you come and meet with the **real** Jesus?' Then the alarm went off.

An encounter with the real Jesus will always change us.

An encounter with the real Jesus is an encounter with God Himself, not a semi-god or a holy man or a third of God, but God, Himself, the Almighty eternal God.

Saul met with the real Jesus. Or I should say, the real Jesus met with Saul.

(Saul was later called Paul. And I may interchange the names.)

In his own account of this meeting Paul says that it was about noon – bright daylight, but the light that blinded him outshone the blazing noonday sun. (God created light before He created the sun and other stars.)

Paul immediately recognised that he was confronted by One who was greater than himself: 'Who are you, **Lord?**'

He was encountering the true God, the real Jesus, and God was telling him that, in his zealous efforts to eradicate the followers of Jesus, he was, in fact, working against God Himself.

In Paul's own account of his conversion, in Acts 26, he tells us that Jesus said to him: 'It is hard for you to kick against the goads'. A goad is a stick with a sharp end, used to direct beasts of burden. This suggests that Paul's conscience was already pricking him. He knew the scriptures that pointed to Messiah, he'd heard Stephen's sermon about Jesus, he'd witnessed Stephen's terrible, but glorious, death, but instead of opening his heart to God, he'd become even more eager to destroy all mention of Jesus.

I wonder whether God is pricking away at those men and women, in our time, who have become so vehemently opposed to the church? We should pray for them.

An encounter with the real Jesus is always transformative.

Was Saul changed?

The immediate physical effect was incredibly humbling for this proud, young man who had so much power. He was thrown to the ground, blinded, and had to be led by the hand and go for healing and instructions to one of those he had intended to hound to death.

Was Saul changed?

His own testimony of what happened to him spiritually, at the encounter, is found in his writings. He speaks of dying to himself and being raised and now living in Christ. He says, '... because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions...' The Apostle John puts it like this: 'we have passed from death to life' So, there was an immediate change. Saul was taken out of the dominion of death and into the Kingdom of Life in Christ.

As Ananias prayed for him, he received his sight. Wonderful physical indication of what had happened spiritually.

And he was filled with the Holy Spirit - God, Himself, taking up residence.

Was Saul changed? There were immediate manifestations of this spiritual change in Saul:

- He was baptised, indicating a radical change of heart Acts 22:16

Baptism also symbolised the washing away of sins and the death of his old life and being raised to new life in Christ.

- He immediately began to tell others, preaching Christ in the synagogues in Damascus. Imagine it, this high-flyer among the Pharisees, a disciple of Gamaliel no less, who had come with the express purpose of expunging all traces of what he saw as the cult of Jesus, is now in the synagogues preaching that this Jesus is indeed God.

A Damascus road experience for all?

We sometimes talk about a Damascus Road experience as though it was a norm in Christian experience, but you know, it was unique. It was Jesus' encounter with Saul.

All the apostles encountered Jesus, but in different ways. If all of us were to recount how we first encountered Jesus, we would have different stories to tell.

God knows us all individually and our journey to that point of encounter and the place and means of that encounter is different for all of us.

Here's a thing: I give all of you permission, after the service, to say to the people you talk to, 'Have you ever had an encounter with Jesus? Do tell me about it.' If you haven't had such an encounter, perhaps you would like to hear about the other person's. We are reticent to talk about these things, but I'm giving us permission and encouraging us to do so. Keep it brief!

Paul's encounter with Jesus was unique, but there are key components to any encounter with Jesus:

- An awareness of our sin. God is holy – without sin - and in His presence we become very aware of ours.
- Hopefully, this awareness will lead us to turn away from our sin,
- There should be a surrender of our autonomy to His lordship
- And a transformed life.
- Water baptism (baptism means immersion) is the step we take to show that we have passed from death to life and we are now under new management – Jesus Christ is our Lord.
- A desire to tell others about Him.

The real Jesus

I told you about my dream about the 'real Jesus' and talked earlier about 'real' and 'made up' and how even real people can be misrepresented in books and films.

I want to talk about encountering the real Jesus.

There are many versions of Jesus presented to us in books, films, artwork, TV. We can get a distorted image.

Even reading the Scripture we can be selective, making a Jesus to suit us.

There was a young bride who, when they came to the marriage promises responded:

“Um, I'll take 'better', 'richer' and, um, 'health'.”

She had misunderstood; it wasn't a choice, it was all-or-nothing.

I remember showing someone Jesus' own words in the Gospel; the response was, 'That's not the Jesus I know'.

I suspect that we all block uncomfortable bits out, but we need to know the real Jesus, not a Jesus of our own invention.

There was another young bride who was very nervous before the service, but the minister told her not to worry just to remember that first she would walk up the aisle, then stand in front of the altar and then they would sing a hymn. As she walked up the aisle toward her bridegroom, the congregation was startled to hear her muttering, 'Aisle, altar, hymn. Aisle, altar, hymn.' (= 'I'll alter him')

That wouldn't be a good start to a marriage, and, actually, doomed to failure.

Just as we cannot alter our spouse, or child or friend to be the person we want them to be, but we have to get to know the person they are, so, we cannot alter Jesus to be what we want, we have to get to know Him as He is.

It will take a lifetime

We went through a phase, when the girls were children, of putting on records on wintry Sunday afternoons. They liked to dance around to the lively ones, but there was one favourite which wasn't very jolly – it was The Carpenters Album and we enjoyed the love songs Karen sang so soulfully, even though they could be gloomy. One song has the line: 'We'll take a lifetime to say, 'I knew you well.'"

Paul's change was, in one sense, immediate, but he spent three years in and around Damascus, being caught up, as it were, by the Lord. He'd missed out on the three years the other apostles spent with Jesus.

Then he spent a couple of weeks with Peter in Jerusalem and, after fourteen years of ministry, returned to Jerusalem to check with the other apostles that he was preaching the right things.

He wrote, many years later, 'I want to know Christ...' (Phil.3 v 10)

I'll take a lifetime to say, 'I knew you well...'

Are we still encountering the real Jesus?

There was an old man who'd had an amazing conversion experience in his youth. He wrote it down at the time and kept it in a drawer in his cottage. When folk came to visit him, he would ask if they would like to hear his testimony and, being polite, they would say, 'Yes'. He would get the paper from the drawer and read his amazing testimony to them. One day, however, when he opened the drawer, his face fell, he was dismayed: 'The mice have eaten my testimony.'

Is my only testimony that encounter with Jesus on October 3rd, 1966, when He turned my life around? That was a tremendous time - a miracle in my life.

Or a few months later when I was baptised?

Or a year or so later when I had another transforming experience of the Holy Spirit?

Am I stuck back then, or have I got testimony of what Jesus is doing in my life, now?

Can I say, 'I'll take a lifetime to know Him well, but I know Him, now, so much better than I did back then.'?

As we go through Acts we are considering what it was about the early church that made them willing to go to any lengths to make Christ known to others.

I think that what we learn from this incident in Acts 9 is that we need a transforming encounter with the real Jesus, through the Holy Spirit.

Some of us may never have had that encounter,

others of us have got stuck somewhere in our past testimony

and some of us have settled for Christianity, rather than the challenge of an ongoing encounter with the real Jesus.

An encounter with the Lord Jesus will certainly change us – maybe in a dramatic way, maybe in more subtle ways, but He will change us.

So, will we all become mini-Apostle Pauls? What a scary thought! Certainly not! Paul had his personality and sphere of work; Peter's was different. Stephen and Philip and Ananias, Martha, the Marys, Priscilla: all transformed by Jesus, but still different personalities, all serving Him in different ways in different places.

One of the things that is glaringly obvious, in the whole of the Bible, is that God didn't create a homogenous human race, but delights in and uses, our individuality and diversity.

So I'll close with these questions:

- Have you ever had a life-changing encounter with the real Lord Jesus?
- Is there evidence of that transformation in your life?
- Are you still encountering Him,
 - still revising your understanding of Him as you get to know Him better,
 - still being transformed,
 - still doing what he says and going wherever He sends?

Is it burning within us, that we must tell people about Him?

That's His commission to us.

God's love for the lost is greater than ours could ever be. God is yearning for them to know the good news about salvation – look at the lengths He went to to make it possible.

Listen to this:

If we are His, then Christ is in us –God's love and longing for the lost is there in Christ, in us.

If it's not evident, it's because we are blocking it.

Let's be quiet and ask the Holy Spirit to show us what's happened to us, what the blockage is that is keeping us from talking about Jesus. Let's repent that we hinder the work of Christ through us and ask Him to meet with us again and transform us.

Today, I need to encounter the living God and know, once again, His hand upon my life. Nothing less will do. Heavenly Father, send Your Holy Spirit to me that I may have fellowship with You through Jesus, Your Son. Amen [WordLive]

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