

**Easter 3**  
**18/4/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 9:1-20**

**Psalm 30**

**Revelation 5:11-14**

**John 21:1-19**

**Hemmed in by grace**

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The novelist Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul: "*I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.*" [Willimon, *Acts*, p 73]. Although there is no sign of a horse in Acts Paul's story has become paradigmatic of conversion to Christianity, and none has been retold so many times. In the telling we have preferred the version read today rather than Paul's own sparse account of it, as found in Galatians [1:15 – 16] in which he does not describe the events on the Damascus road. Paul's conversion as set forth in Acts has all the hallmarks of the call of a prophet. And his life was completely turned around. Paul the persecutor became a brother in Christ. Eventually the persecutor was himself persecuted and died for the faith he was commissioned to share amongst the Gentiles. If we follow Acts rather than Flannery O'Connor we would say Paul came to this change because he was bowled over by God, knocked for a six and made blind until, through contact with the very people of faith he sought to persecute, he saw the truth and gave himself to life in the Way of Christ. While there is no doubt Paul's change came about freely, it is possible to see in his story a sense that he was hemmed in by grace. Confronted by a new reality, there was only one way he could go.

The sense of being hemmed in by God surfaces again in the story of Peter's reaffirmation of his call. John's story the disciples' fishing trip and fish and chips for breakfast with Jesus by the lake (!) is rather like Luke's version of the great catch of fish in chapter 5. Luke's is not a resurrection story, but in it Peter is awestruck at discovering the power of God at work in fishing. He says to Jesus "get away from me! I am a sinful man" but is called to live a new life, catching people for the Kingdom (vs 10). In Matthew there is another story about Peter. The disciples are in a boat on the lake in a storm, and Jesus comes to them across the water. Peter, the impetuous, faltering leader, set out to walk to Jesus, but began to sink and was lifted up again. Without the fish, the pattern is the same as in John, and the two are like John's story of Thomas in which the Risen Christ seems to come especially to the faltering disciple who doubted or denied the faith.

After the meal on the shore of the lake Peter found himself cornered. His feet were on dry land, but actually he was in deep water. He was about to be recycled as leader of the flock. We know how, as Jesus was led towards the cross, Peter denied him three times. Now he suffered the pain and humiliation of being challenged three times to renew his love, and his discipleship. Jesus' persistence irritated Peter. It is good to note that grace is not always a warm fuzzy thing. Peter had a hard choice. Could he love Christ and live in his own way, symbolised by long nights fishing for fish? Or would he take up his cross afresh and choose to live in the power of the Easter faith gifted to him anew that day? There were two choices, but in a sense there was only one: the choice to live in the power of a strength not his own, which flowed to him from the hand of the living God.

When Peter earlier turned back to his old trade and took the others with him, it seems harmless, but it was not. He walked away from life and reconnected with the power of death: it was dark and they fished all night for no result. But in the morning, down by the lake a hand reached towards him and a voice called him to life again. The God who did not abandon Jesus to death did not abandon Peter either. The living God came offering a particular grace. Peter the denier and backslider was offered the renewal of love, love that would find its meaning in feeding the flock of Christ.

In June 1766, well in to his ministry, John Wesley wrote to his brother Charles and confessed his inner turmoil.

*“And yet this is the mystery, I do not love God. I never did... Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense of that word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen,... And yet to be so employed of God! and so hedged in that I can neither go forward nor backward!... I am borne along, I know not how, that I can’t stand still. I want all the world to come to – I know not what. Neither am I impelled to this by fear of any kind. I have no more fear than love. [Williams, *Open to Judgement*, this quote and ideas below from p 202-6] These are bizarre and yet sobering words. Here is a man who seems to completely lack a sense of self, and yet is so driven by his call to serve he feels “hedged in by God” and doesn’t know what else to do except be born along by love.*

The Anglican church of Wesley’s day saw him as irresponsible and charged him with emotionalism, subjective understandings of guilt and forgiveness, and with stirring up unhealthy excitement amongst the uneducated. Even in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century it was still possible for a parish priest in Cornwall to attribute the prevalence of illegitimate births in his parish to Methodist influence because Methodists encouraged ignorant peasant girls to give way to their emotions. But Wesley’s letter goes on to show that hedged in he may be, but he sought to live in the gift of God’s justification, and preached complete trust in God in the midst of coldness, unhappiness, confusion and boredom. Beyond all these things he himself knew and felt, he sought to put himself in God’s hands and to be employed in the work of divine love.

John Wesley’s life is seen by many, particularly his “politely contemptuous Anglican contemporaries” as a muddle, full of false starts, bad judgements and wrong turnings. As a young don he grew his own hair long so that he would not engage in the vanity of wearing a wig. As a young missionary in Georgia he became entangled in a humiliating love affair and offended his flock, only just avoiding arrest by fleeing the colony. At home in England we know well the story of how he was at last touched by the word that God gives what we shall never earn. But even with this revolutionary knowledge he continued to be a man of faults, pompous and arrogant, unaware of the difference between personal and pastoral boundaries, a man of confused sexuality and the maker of more than one bad marriage. He was reviled for preaching out of doors, was betrayed by people he relied on, and ruined his chances of a rapprochement with the Anglican Church by ordaining a “bishop” to further the work in America. Wesley was a fool for Christ, but Rowan Williams says he was probably the greatest witness to the love of Christ the eighteenth century Anglican Church produced. He knew he was a fool and that his life was a mess. He hardly knew how to say what it meant to be loved by God, and yet he could not help being “so employed” for that love. As he died he said: “the best of all is God is with us”. It was this knowledge that had allowed him to live as he had done with all its mistakes. He knew his life was to be found hidden in God and that the task was to go on with God.

Peter, Paul and John Wesley, three who were hemmed in by God, frail human beings who, though they stumbled and fell were and raised, and raised again to witness to the renewing power of divine grace, and the enriching power of life in Christ.

These are stories for the Easter Season, memories of the way new life came to the first Christians as they set out on the path of discipleship, and to people who served the church many centuries later so that they touch us even today. St John said: “There are many other things Jesus did, if every one of them were written down, the whole world could not contain the books that would be written” (v 25).

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