

The road to Damascus

Planning

Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Easter 3 Year C
Acts 9.1-20, Psalm 30,
Revelation 5.11-14, John 21.1-19

Theme Seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary

Eight weeks in which we find in the Acts of the Apostles Luke's understanding of what it means to encounter the risen Christ. Read more about the theme on page 1 and in *Month by month* on the [WEB](#).

Week 3 of 8

The road to Damascus Acts 9.1-20

A second, and dramatically different, key witness to the power of the resurrection appears this week, as we meet Paul the apostle.

This week provides an opportunity to:

- become familiar with this account of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus
- recognise the call of Jesus within the context of Paul's life and experience
- consider how we might respond in times of disempowerment
- explore the phenomenon of the Temple police.

Lectionary variation Resources for the RC Gospel reading can be found in the resources bank on the [WEB](#).

Check out the *Peter & Paul: factfile* sheets that are available on the [WEB](#).

A Bible study worksheet on this reading, suitable for midweek groups, is available on the [WEB](#).

Gather

Prepare the space

Renew your signpost cross from last week. Replace 'Jerusalem' with 'Towards Damascus'. On or around the signpost cross, display pictures and newspaper headlines that have been cut and disjointed so that they no longer make sense. Pin up a local map upside down, so it seems unfamiliar. Place a set of *Peter & Paul: factfile* sheets (see [WEB](#) for template) beside the signpost cross and encourage people to take one.

Gathering words

There are times when God interrupts our life, stepping into our busyness to turn us around so that we can suddenly see what is real and important. When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, everything about his life changed, and not all of it for the better.

Open the Word

Bible notes

New Testament Acts 9.1-20

Saul approved of Stephen's stoning and began to persecute the Church (7.58-8.3). Stephen was a 'Hellenist', a Greek-speaking Jew from overseas, rather than a 'Hebrew', an Aramaic-speaking Jew from Palestine. Stephen's acceptance of Jesus and rejection of the Temple offended other Hellenists, who denounced him to the Council (6.8-15). Saul, 'a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia' (21.39) who wrote in Greek, is also a 'Hellenist'. When he returns from Damascus to

Jerusalem, 'speaking boldly in the name of the Lord', he too offends some of his fellow Hellenists, who seek to kill him as they killed Stephen (9.28-29).

Greek-speaking Jewish Christians played a crucial part in preaching the gospel to Gentiles. The persecution following Stephen's death was directed not against the 'Hebrew' apostles, who remained in Jerusalem, but against 'Hellenist' disciples such as Philip (8.1-5), who preached from place to place and baptised the Ethiopian eunuch (8.38), the first non-Jewish Christian in Acts.

Saul pursues the Hellenist disciples of Jesus, who have taken the faith as far as Damascus in Syria. Belonging to 'the Way' (9.2), they understood their acceptance of Jesus as the right way of understanding their Jewish Scriptures, just as the Dead Sea Sect at Qumran argued that in their interpretation of Scripture they were 'those who have chosen the Way' (CD 9.18).

Paul's letters (Galatians 1.13-17; 1 Corinthians 9.1-2; 15.8-10) and Acts link the appearance of the risen Jesus to Saul with his commission to preach the gospel to Jews and Gentiles. The blinding light and regained sight recall Simeon's description of the infant Jesus as 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 2.32), itself drawn from the prophetic vision of Israel as the servant given by God 'as a light to the nations' (Isaiah 49.6). The persecutor Saul now shares the vision of the persecuted Stephen (Acts 7.56; 22.20). The risen Jesus is the suffering servant of his people (9.5), whose sufferings Saul will share (9.16) as God works in him to fulfil Israel's calling. Paul later recalled that the Lord had said, 'I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light' (26.17-18).

Gospel John 21.1-19

At the Last Supper Peter said he would lay down his life for Jesus, but instead he three times denied knowing him, as Jesus had anticipated (13.36-38; 18.15-27). Now Peter is back at his nets, and the risen Jesus restores their relationship with his renewed invitation to a meal, and his reiterated call, 'Follow me'.

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Week by week

Bible notes
Prayers
PostScript: up-to-the-minute comment
Bible study worksheet
Children's sheet
Further resources
Drama sketches
Sermon notes on a different Bible reading
Links to other materials for this week's readings

**Towards
Damascus**

Andrew recognised Jesus as the Messiah and brought his brother Simon to him (1.40-42). Now the beloved disciple recognises Jesus and says to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'. But Peter still wants to outdo the others, leaping into the water to reach Jesus first, but ashamed enough to take time to cover his nakedness, like Adam in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3.10). It is therefore best to understand Jesus' first question as, 'Do you love me more than these other disciples love me?' Wisely, Simon no longer makes that claim, and three times answers only, 'You know that I love you'. Forgiven his threefold denial, Simon will be Peter the Rock, knowing that we love because God first loved us. Now he is ready to feed Jesus' sheep, following him to the end.

The road to Damascus

Seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary Week 3

As Jesus' apostle, Paul served Israel's God, and it is better to speak of his 'call' rather than his 'conversion'. However, he returned from Damascus no longer as one of the powerful, one of the religious police zealous to impose the law by violence, but as one of the powerless, transformed by the compassion of the suffering Christ. Saul had been 'far more zealous' than his fellow Pharisees (see Galatians 1.13-14; Philippians 3.5-6), just as Simon had tried to outdo his fellow disciples. But as Paul and Peter they preached only that Christ died and rose for all.

Q Do we ever find ourselves tempted to act as religious police?

Q How has God spoken to us when we have felt at our most powerless?

Sermon ideas

- Don't forget *PostScript* on the [WEB](#): up-to-the-minute comment available on Thursday morning.
- More movement this week, with close connections expressed in both readings between physical and spiritual/emotional journeys. Paul and Peter, the main protagonists of the Acts cycle, share in this dynamic, and the journeys of both are in their own ways dramatic. (You may wish to draw attention to the *Peter & Paul: factfile* sheets: see [WEB](#) that demonstrate the parallels between their stories.) Saul/Paul sets out as a member of



the 'Temple police' (from last week's Acts reading) with the intention of continuing the persecution of those on the Way. Something happens, which Luke explains as an encounter with the risen Lord. The effect is so profound that when Paul comes back to himself he has made the complete U-turn, affirming the identity of Jesus as Son of God.

- Peter's literal journey is shorter, in and out of the fishing boat, and with the rather dramatic leap into the sea to greet Jesus on the beach. His emotional and spiritual journey is different from Paul's but just as profound. Peter had denied and betrayed Jesus before his death, but none of this stops the huge enthusiasm to meet Jesus again: in other words, Peter himself effects a kind of turning round, perhaps based on his experience at the tomb or in the upper room. Jesus' response, while searching and maybe even teasing, is to heal the hurt and failure of the courtyard scene, and to affirm Peter's identity in the cohort of disciples. The narrative ends in an image that mirrors the disempowerment of Paul. It is in the recognition of our vulnerability that the journey to follow Christ is enabled to start.

- Recalling our own experience of vulnerability or disempowerment is relatively easy if rather uncomfortable, but consider imaginatively what else we rely on to lead perfectly 'normal' lives: the power in our cars, the power to heat our homes, the power to run computers, mobile phones, iPads, and so on. Feel the disruption of what it's like to lose one of these even for a short time. And how do we learn from this?

- One of the leitmotifs that threads its way through both these accounts is the change of heart, or U-turn, as politicians describe it unfavourably. Paul's transition from sight to blindness to new sight is both physical and spiritual. Paul had been spiritually blind, and the likely vigorous man who began the journey is now led like a child, recalling lines from John Henry Newman's poem *Lead, Kindly Light*: 'one step enough for me'. The second transition is from temple policeman to new missionary, from gamekeeper to poacher, reversing the normal order. Paul is like the spy who has been 'turned', about which John le Carré writes so evocatively. But note that his underlying character has not changed that much. His energy for 'threats and murder' is now transposed to proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues.

All ages together

See p.33 for an idea to engage very young children during worship.

Present the reading

Not everyone in a church will have had a definite conversion experience: each of us is different. Compare the accounts of how Paul and Peter met Jesus. They were from completely diverse backgrounds and of dissimilar temperaments. On the [WEB](#) you can find a conversation reflecting on this.

Explore the reading

Jesus didn't come to Paul's attention during his lifetime. But with reports of the resurrection and the increase in the activities of his followers, Paul was there to approve the death of Stephen for 'speaking against Moses and against God'. With the best intentions of his convictions he then set out to destroy the embryonic Church.

On the [WEB](#) you can find ideas to explore the work and relationships of Paul described in Acts.

Prayers

The text of these prayers is on the [WEB](#).

Call to worship

Ananias said, 'Here I am, Lord'.

Peter said, 'Lord you know that I love you'.

Paul said, 'Who are you, Lord?'

What are the words in our hearts this morning?

Gathering prayer

Risen Christ,
you met Paul on his way to Damascus
and Peter while he was fishing.
Meet us as we gather here
and be with us in our daily life,
that we may be transformed as they were,
fulfilling our potential and discovering new possibilities
in ministry and service.

Amen.

A prayer of approach

We have come from different places,
carrying different burdens,
different expectations, different hopes,
but together we pray:
God of the road to Damascus,
shatter our complacency, disturb our certainties
and open our hearts
to new possibilities and new truths,
that the scales of our prejudices, dogmas and mistakes
may fall away and, like Saul, we may become
the people you truly made us to be.
We ask this in Jesus' name,
Christ who lived and died and rose again.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

Lord Jesus,
you interrupted Peter's fishing and Paul's journey
and brought better things.
Forgive us when we interrupt others
with our self-importance.
Forgive our impatience when others interrupt us
with their needs.
May we be open to your prompting
and adaptable towards those around us,
that your kingdom may come
and your purposes flourish.

Amen.

A personal prayer

Lord, come and have breakfast with me today
for I feel so alone.
Send me a friend like Ananias
to lead me back on the right path
and to minister to me in your name.
Give me the strength to be a friend to others,
and in my own quiet way let me speak out
and draw others into your love.

Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

God who sustains us,
we give thanks that you meet us in our daily life,
affirming and equipping us for all that lies ahead.

With Peter we give you our love.

We give thanks that you continue to feed your people today
through the bread of your body.

With Peter we give you our hunger.

We give thanks that you call us to follow you
in spite of our past failures.

With Peter we give you our gratitude.

We give thanks that you meet us on the road
and give our journeys new direction.

With Paul we respond to your challenge.

We give thanks that you transform our misguided passion
into energy for your kingdom.

With Paul we let go of all that blinded us to your purposes.

We give thanks for those who, like Ananias, have been agents of
your healing.

With Paul we acknowledge our calling and go out in your strength.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

For those whose hearts are set on violence:

we pray God's transformation.

For those who are blinded by hatred:

we pray God's healing.

For those whose weakness
makes them dependent on others:

we pray God's grace.

For those who have lost their way:

we pray God's direction.

For those who feel unloved:

we pray God's comfort.

For those who minister to others:

we pray God's gentleness.

For all people and all creation:

we pray God's peace.

Amen.

A way into prayer

Paul was empowered by his hatred of those he believed to be
enemies of God. He was disempowered by an encounter with
the living Christ. He was re-empowered by the Holy Spirit. Have
there been times when loss has led to greater strength? Do we
misuse the power we have over others? Reflect, and invite God
to bless your strengths and your vulnerabilities.

A prayer for all ages together

Lord, we are here,
with all our faith and all our doubt,
in all our strength and in all our weakness,
and we would know you, and love you,
more and more.

Amen.

Respond to the Word

*Ideas to suit different interests, ages and learning preferences.
The Children's Sheet [WEB](#) offers activities to do in worship & at home.*

Change direction

Play dominoes or another game that involves changes of direction. Talk about how you choose which way to go when the opportunity to change presents itself.

Learning to change

Blindfold a willing volunteer and ask them to carry out some ordinary tasks. If they are too good at it, tie one hand behind their back too! When we are disempowered we are obliged to change the way we do things.

Shine the light! Change the way!

Gather two small teams of people (Peter and Paul) at the signpost with its direction pointer 'Towards Damascus'. Give each team some cut-out footprints or some footprint confetti (see [WEB](#)). Each team faces away from the signpost. Behind the signpost, hidden from their view, display the words of Acts 9.1-3. On the word 'go', each team starts to create a road to Damascus by laying down their footsteps, while the congregations follow the words from Acts pointed out by a leader. When the leader reaches the words 'suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him', everyone shouts loudly, 'Shine the light! Change the way!'. At this point the road-layers must change direction. Repeat several times until you have two roads with their changes of direction threading their way through the building.

A simple worship activity for all ages

Use the song 'I am the church'. This song is ideal to sing during this time when we are thinking about the growth of the Church. The chorus has easy actions and it is great fun to sing. You can find it as 367 in *Junior Praise* (2 or combined); 204 in *Church Hymnary 4/Hymns of Glory, Songs of Praise* and in *Big Blue Planet*.

When very young children are present

Today's activity offers a chance to play with things that help us to explore Paul's experiences on the road to Damascus.

You will need: a strip of cloth or a play road system; wooden or plastic people; torches; blocks or bricks to 'build Damascus'.

Begin with this paraphrase: Paul was walking along the road to Damascus (*use your hands to make a walking action*). He saw a bright light (*put your hands over your eyes*). He fell to the ground (*bang the ground with your hand*). Paul heard Jesus speaking to him (*cup your ears*), but he was blind, and could not see (*cover your eyes with your hands*). Paul walked on to Damascus (*'walking' action*). Ananias went to meet Paul (*'walking' action*). Ananias prayed (*put your hands together in prayer*). Now Paul could see again (*cover your eyes and then fling your hands away*). Repeat so the children can join in.

Invite the children to make a 'road' and build Damascus at one end. Invite them to walk the figures along the road, and use the torches to make the bright light that blinded Paul.

Using today's psalm

Psalm 30

The voice of this psalm has known despair and serious illness, has stared death in the face – but sees these things in the past, for now he is restored to joy and health by the Lord. Alongside the reading from Acts, this psalm has extraordinary power – we can imagine Saul/Paul giving thanks in these words. In every community there are people who will recognise some part of this psalm in their own lives: another example of how the psalms are a direct line between our experience and the heart of God.

Response line Between verses, everyone says or sings: I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have lifted me up or You have made me, Lord, as strong as the mountains. There is a response action on the [WEB](#).

Hymns and songs based on Psalm 30 include 'I'll lift my voice, O Lord' (PRA), 'I exalt you, Lord eternal' (PRA), 'I will exalt you, Lord' (versions in RJ, CH4/HGSP, NEP).

Hymns and songs

*Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.
A key to abbreviations is on the [WEB](#).*

*From heaven you came
How lovely on the mountains
I danced in the morning
Immortal, invisible, God only wise
Into a world of darkness since the fall (LAU)
I, the Lord of sea and sky
Just as I am, without one plea
Lord of glory, in our darkness (SG)
O happy day that fixed my choice
O Peter, you were named by Christ (LAU)
Open our eyes, Lord
The strangest of saints (HSN, WGWG)
We sing the glorious conquest (AMNS, CP, NEH)
Will you come and follow me*

Send out

Live in faith

If there is anyone you would not expect to be added to a list of those who meet Jesus, prayerfully consider if God is calling you to interrupt their life.

Pray

May the Holy Spirit empower you
to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God,
and may you meet the risen Christ as you work,
as you journey,
in one another, and in the world he came to save.
Amen.