

Acts 9

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, is not only the patron of physicians, but also of painters. Different renaissance paintings show Luke behind a painter's easel, capturing Jesus' mother Mary. He is seen as the first painter of icons and is the patron of artists. It is likely that Luke has never painted an icon at all, but what we do know is that Luke, as the writer of his gospel and the book of Acts, is mastering the art of visualizing a narrative. Luke is known for his compelling and expressive storytelling! Luke pictures Saul before his conversion as if he were a ferocious animal. Saul is breathing out murderous threats, an illusion to a wild beast ready to devour its prey. Earlier, Luke writes that Saul was destroying the church, and uses a word in Greek of animals destroying the crops. Saul's behavior is more that of a wild animal than that of a normal human being. No wonder he was feared among the Christians. Saul was one of those fanatics who will do anything to reach his goal. He was ready to offer others and himself up for what he saw as the higher cause. He was focused in what he did: he persecuted the people belonging to the Way. The focus of his hatred were Christians and Saul's goal was to destroy all of them. He went to great lengths to reach his goal and even traveled to another country, to Syria, to its capital Damascus.

On his way to Damascus, a remarkable event took place. A light from heaven shone around Saul and a voice said to him: Saul, why do you persecute Me? We know from Saul's testimony later in the book of Acts that this happened at noon.

You might know from experience how bright the light of the sun is at noon, in a tropical or sub-tropical country. Luke tells that a great light from heaven shone around Saul, with such a brightness that it dwarfed the light of the sun and left Saul blinded on the floor. Jesus showed his glory to Saul and revealed himself to him by showing his glory and by his words.

For us, the words 'Saul, why do you persecute Me?' do not ring the same bells as for Saul. The name Saul is the same name as the one of the first king of Israel, king Saul. The Messiah was to be the great son of king David, the successor of king Saul. King Saul and his successor David lived

for years in animosity. The phrase Jesus uses to convince and convert Saul is a direct quote from the Old Testament, from 1 Samuel 26. King Saul was persecuting David and was trying to kill him. At one of their encounters, David said to king Saul: Why do you persecute me? Certainly, the New Testament Saul had to think of those ancient words. Jesus used the name Saul twice: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me. And Saul, being a scholar of the Bible, immediately knew that this was the great David addressing him as if he were king Saul, the persecutor of king David.

Imagine the shift this caused in Saul's world. It was nothing less but a paradigm shift to him. He had the idea of serving the living God by persecuting the people of the Way. It never passed his mind that Jesus could be the Messiah, the great son of David. Till this day, Saul was convinced that Christianity was the biggest scam ever. He thought he was serving the Almighty by persecuting the church. Now Jesus appeared to him, saying: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?

Suddenly Saul realized that he had not been on God's side. He had acted as an enemy of God. Till then, Saul had been convinced that the people of the Way were the ultimate enemy. But now he himself results to be the enemy. He thought he was serving the Lord of lights, but he had served the prince of darkness. What a shock it must have been to discover that he, Saul, had been acting as the enemy of God and that by persecuting the church he had persecuted the long-awaited Messiah of Israel: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?

What a blind spot Saul had! You wonder how it is possible to fool yourself in such a way. It must be such a shocker to discover that instead of being the good person you thought you were, find out that you have been opposing God and his plans. Saul's image of himself was brutally shattered.

We can have similar blind spots in our lives. We do not have to become a religious fanatic like Saul, to be blinded. What would the light of Christ reveal in our lives at this very moment, when it would illuminate the darkest and most secret places of our hearts? We might think we live as disciples of Christ, but we still might refuse to surrender certain parts of our lives to him.

I lived in Latin America and Africa and in my current work for NET Foundation visit Asian countries as well. I found that sin in the Southern hemisphere oftentimes is experienced more profoundly when the truth is out in the public. Sin and shame are very much related. We from the West immediately spot this as a blind spot in the lives of some of our brothers and sisters overseas.

But what about people from the West, how do we react when Jesus says that you cannot serve God and the Mammon/ the god of money at the same time? Still we hunt after bigger houses and cars and reason that our support to the church and Christian NGO's shows that we are no slaves of our possessions. What if the Holy Spirit would enlighten the hearts of all of us, no matter which culture we are from, and show the blind spots in our lives so that we could render ourselves completely to the Lord? Saul, who after his conversion has his name changed into Paul, later writes about what the work of Christ means. And to our shock, he pictures all people who live without Christ as enemies of God. He says in Romans: the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. He says that when the Son of God died for us, we all lived in enmity with God. What he is saying, is that all of us have lived as enemies of God our Maker. Yes, we are made beautifully. We are created in God's image. But the sobering reality is that Saul's situation is not unique. There is no real life in us without Christ. In the presence of God and without Christ, all of us are like a wild beast, just like Saul was.

That is a shocker. We love to see ourselves as good people, as intrinsically good. We think in our heart of hearts, that we are good persons who will always serve the common good. However, the word of God questions that. Do we love our fellow citizens as we love ourselves? Do we love God above all things? Or is it true that we from our own nature put ourselves in the center of the universe and serve ourselves, instead of God. This story challenges us to look at our own lives.

Do we have blind spots just as Saul had? What would you and what would I discover if the light of Christ would shine on your life? What is it that you have kept in the darkness? Where could we be misled by our own thoughts and serve the darkness, instead of the light? What would I and

you have to confess to Christ if He were to put our whole being in the open before his Presence?

How does Jesus deal with Saul? At the end of the day, Saul is persecuting the church and therefore persecuting Jesus himself! Saul is Jesus' enemy! Does Jesus strike him with a flash of light as his judge and leave him without help? The opposite is true. Jesus first says "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And Saul responds, "Who are you, Lord?" And he answers, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." Saul's encounter with Jesus helps him not only to see his blind spot, but also to receive healing. Luke tells us how the bright light leaves him blind for three days. For three days, Saul is without sight and neither eats nor drinks. It is as if Saul is in the grave. Three days without light, without food. Three days of utter darkness. But the Lord encourages him. Saul starts praying. He understands his condition, he knows that he is what his name says: a Saul, a persecutor of king David. And he starts praying in the dark. In the meanwhile, God called Ananias to go and lay hands on Saul, so that he can regain his sight. Ananias hesitates. He objects and says: Lord, this man persecutes the church! He came to Damascus to have us imprisoned and killed!

But the Lord says: Go, he is a chosen instrument to carry my Name to the gentiles. Ananias goes. Saul, still sitting in the dark, hears Ananias approach him and Saul feels his hands upon him and his voice saying: *"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."*

This whole story is in fact an Easter story. Saul was a sworn enemy of Jesus. His conversion however mimics the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is as if Saul is in the grave when he is blind for three days. John Chrysostomos, Early church bishop of Constantinople (=Istanbul) says in a sermon about Saul's conversion: *For three days neither did he eat nor drink, being blinded. What could equal this? This took place, that it might be shown that Christ was indeed risen. This furious assailant of Christ, how should this man have become a believer, had not the power of his resurrection been great indeed?*

Saul experienced in a way what happened to Jesus: he was in the darkness for three days and the scales of death fell from his eyes, and he came alive again. Luke says: he rose!

The U-turn of Saul isn't pictured by Luke as an abstract story that doesn't apply to our lives. It is very close to the Christian experience. The big change is not that the enemy became a friend. The big change is that the Son of God was revealed in his life. That is the change we all need. I'm reading a book called *Evangelism in a Skeptical world*, written by the Asian American Theologian Sam Chan.

He says that there are roughly three types of conversions in the New Testament.

The Saul types, who lived in animosity. The Timothy types who always loved God. And the Prodigal son types, the people who purposefully got estranged from the Father.

To me it seems that the common denominator of the three is that in the lives of all those different people the Son of God is revealed to bring the change we all need. We all need the same. Jesus is our U-turn. God became man. Christ suffered in our place. He was punished for our sins. He died and resurrected. We can only change when He is revealed in us. By faith, we are made alive in Christ. His death becomes ours. He wasn't defeated, but conquered death and Satan on the cross. And we are made new in Jesus by faith. Just like Paul. What happens in us spiritually is mimicked in our baptism and in the Holy Eucharist. That is how Luke's story ends. Paul is Baptized. And he takes food and is strengthened; the same word Luke uses in the narrative of the last supper.

What do we take home from this? It might well be that you and I still have hidden spots in our lives. That we haven't surrendered ourselves to Christ. That we do not live the full joy of salvation, because we refuse to abide in Christ. Or we might still live as enemies of Christ. For all of us goes, that we can look upon Jesus. His blood is sufficient to wash us from all our sins and to resurrect us with Him.

I do not know you. Maybe you are painting the narrative of your own life, without Christ. That doesn't end well. You will miss out on the healing,

the reconciliation, the love, the eternal life, the purpose, the power of the Holy Spirit and all the other things that you receive when Christ is revealed in you.

The drama that Luke painted can be yours. You might know Christ, but part of your life might still be hidden in the dark. Or you may still live as an enemy of the cross. I therefore want to ask you something. I would want you to go home and ask this one question to the Lord. It is the question Saul asked. He later in Acts 22 tells about his conversion in his own words. When he fell on the ground, he asked Jesus this one question: 'what shall I do, Lord?' He opened himself to Jesus and started to obey him with that question.

That's a sort of a home assignment I would want to give to you and to myself, a small five words question to take home with us today. That question could impact our lives forever. Let us first invite the Lord to shine his light on our life through the Holy Spirit and then ask Him that same question: What shall I do, Lord?

Amen.