

ON THE ROAD

Sermon preached at St Andrews on the Terrace, 9th July 2023 by Rev Dr Frank Hanson

First of all two comments.

Today I catch up with John Wesley! He was still preaching at the age of 89. Three or four years ago I said I was taking no more services. I was finished. But here I am today at 89 copying Saint John.

Then too, for 10 years in worship classes I told my students about the importance of the Lectionary, how it guides us through the Christian year, and that it needed to be taken seriously.

Today I am ignoring my own advice. I want to go outside the Lectionary readings because I feel impelled to preach about Saul - in particular about Saul's mid-life crisis.

I know we usually call it his conversion - a mystical experience on the road to Damascus. But I'm not a very mystical person and I find mysticism difficult to relate to. But I can relate to a mid-life crisis. I had one. Probably more than one.

I also know it's a term in common use. We can use it of ourselves - we use it to explain what might be happening to us. And we can use it of others - trying to understand, rightly or wrongly, what might be happening for them.

Let's think of Saul. There are some pretty graphic descriptions, some even from his own mouth.

He was a very uptight person. He belonged to the strictest sect of his religion. "I lived as a Pharisee".

He admitted he'd locked up many Christians, voted against them - both men and women - condemned them to death.

He stood by as Stephen was murdered, held the coats of the murderers, approved of their killing him.

"I ravaged the church, entering house after house, dragging Christians off to prison". Not just a Pharisee but a Pharisee of the Pharisees!

Saul was a passionate fundamentalist. He was a deeply committed literalist. He was full of pent-up rage against these people who were saying and doing such blasphemous things. Because of this there was only one thing to do. Go and get them! Put them away! He was so certain he was absolutely right.

But is that what he really thought?

I suspect there was a tumultuous battle going on within. "Am I really right?". I can feel the tension building up - possibly brewing over a long time.

And then it came to a head. It got triggered by something dramatic. And he was forced, there on the road, to the point of existential choice. Was he going to continue going the way he had been? or was he going to turn completely around and go another way?

That was Saul's mid-life crisis.

And that's what a crisis does. It presents us with choices.

Crises, of course, can come at any age - and at every age. They can be quite small. They can be huge. I've had them - a number of them. I'm sure you have too. Because they are part of living. Some we can cope with readily: "that's over and done with". But some of them are so deep and serious. Perhaps they never go away. They are so powerful they are always there - and they keep popping up.

But what of a crisis? It can close us down - or it can open us up.

You know what it's like when it closes us down - Ignore it, push it away, belittle it, go on quickly to the next agenda.

Or it can open us up - take it seriously, ask questions of it, even make changes - life changing changes.

Two and a half weeks ago I was lying on a table in a theatre at Boulcott Clinic. My surgeon was removing a cancer from my ear. As she did we talked - about family, religion, church - hers and mine. Eventually we got around to the sermon I was preparing. She said, "I heard a story like that once". And I said, "Be careful or it might end up in it". Here it is, as I best remember.

It concerned a young man whose face was seriously scarred in a fire. After surgery the plastic surgeon told him that he would have that scar for the rest of his life. And he said, words to the effect, "You can decide, will you be a victim? or will you be a survivor?" The young man decided to be a survivor, to have the courage to keep going facing life day by day.

Some time later he was involved in an accident at sea. He found himself alone struggling in the water. He could have given up. He remembered the words of the surgeon. Am I a victim or am I a survivor? He found the strength and courage to keep going. He later said, "That surgeon saved my life twice through the words he said - once in the surgery, and once in the sea."

That was his choice - to be a survivor, not a victim.

Three Sundays ago, in Family Time, Fei raised the issue of the future of the church.

It's a serious issue. Main stream churches have been declining since the 1950s. It's sad to think I have spent all my ministry in a church on a slide. I don't regret being a minister. I just wish there had been signs of growth.

But what of the future? Of this church? of the Methodist Church? Of the Presbyterian Church? Of the church in general?

I remember attending a Methodist Conference - it would have been in the 70s I think. The Statistical Secretary gave a very impassioned speech about our decline in numbers and the need to look at this seriously. So what happened? I think, from memory, there was a brief reply. And then we moved on to the next business. Head in the sand?

There has been a malaise in the churches over taking the census results seriously. But we have to. Otherwise, where is the future?

Perhaps what Fei said got some ideas flowing among us. I have one – to be placed among the others.

I thought, what is the cheapest way to get a message out these days? Email! If you're like me you get many of them each day. So I thought we could ask a small group of 2 or 3 to prepare an A4 saying who we (St Andrews) are, and what we stand for.

We could send it out on our churches mailing list. And then ask those of us who want to to send it out – to family, friends, acquaintances. And what for? To acquaint a wider group of people what is OUR message. We already have a statement of what it means to be a Progressive Church. Let's reshape it into a message that tells people about us.

You see, who speaks for the church today? Where do people at large get their clues from? There are high profile people who think very differently to us. And people think, "This is what the church believes". Well part of it does. But there are many who don't. And we are certainly among them.

We are Progressive Christians. We publicise ourselves as a Progressive congregation. This is our Gospel. And the Gospel is for spreading. That is our point of difference.

It may not get one more person here on a Sunday or in our group life. But it would be letting people know.

I know the next few months are not the time for an email post-out. The airwaves are too full of other stuff.

But that's a suggestion for our dilemma, "What is the future of the church?" There will, I am sure, be others.

A crisis – any crisis – requires a response. And the response can be, "Are we victims? Or are we survivors?" Will we allow our concerns about the future to close us down, to push us inwards, or open us up?

Thank God that for Saul it opened him up! It wasn't easy.

The Christians found it hard to believe what had happened to him.

The Jews hunted him down so they could kill him.

It took a long period of time for him to work through the consequences. It even forced a change of name.

But that opening up to a mid-life crisis on the road to Damascus led him, in time, in a whole new direction. It sent him out – eventually – as a disciple to the Gentiles. And that had a profound influence over the course of Christian history. Here was a mid-life crisis whose results continue down to you and me today. Thank God. Amen.

