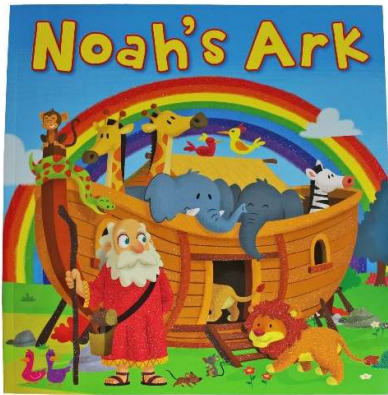


St Edmunds 1<sup>st</sup> May 2022 – Third Sunday of Easter

Revelation 5: 11 – end, Acts 9 :1-20



In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The first question today is – have you got a favourite Bible story. It's not a trick question – for some people that may be like have you got a favourite football team or favourite song by the Beatles (the answer to both of those questions in Peter's case would be polite bewilderment – mine would be wherever I was living's team, and Let it Be). It may be like a small person I met at the Baby and Toddler group on Thursday – Noah's Ark because it has everything – animals and rainbows!

Maybe your favourite Bible story is also Noah's ark, or the Good Samaritan or a story that you remember from childhood. As I never attended a Sunday school until I was in my twenties, I'm not sure where my knowledge of Bible stories came from before then. Probably reading – too many books at an impressionable age. When I was about fourteen I wrote, cast and directed a version of The Good Samaritan. It was well received by my school house, but there was perhaps a little too much action for a rather vigorous bunch of robbers as I recall.



*Conversion window in St Laurence, Measham, Leicestershire*

Maybe your favourite Bible passage is one you had at your wedding, or a child's christening, or a similar occasion. Maybe you read or heard it when you were particularly emotional. Possibly my favourite passage is the one we have heard – at some length – this morning. It is because I had it at my baptism – which I can remember as I was twenty one. It was by full immersion, which tends to be very memorable. Anyway, the reading about Paul's conversion was referred to in the sermon - which took about twenty minutes because it was a Baptist church. We still have some to go this morning ...

What had this story got to do with me? Well, Paul was a lawyer, and that seemed to be my fate at that particular time. Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul talks about his training in the Jewish law. That would have been a lifelong commitment, from earliest childhood he would have listened to stories from the Torah. Later he would have entered into debates, discussions and questions about the Jewish Law, much like the twelve-year-old Jesus famously did in the Temple at Jerusalem while his parents looked for him. Of course, Paul would have been listening, absorbing information, possibly venturing an opinion as he grew older. I think what Mike, the Baptist minister, was trying to say, was that to an extent my discovery of faith as an adult was an interruption to my life. Something that stopped me in my tracks, made me think about my life differently. So maybe he had a point.



*St Paul, Quarndon, Derbyshire*

Possibly because of that service, I have been interested in what happened to Paul at this point. Paul was a strong person, firm in his own Jewish faith, and determined that it should not be watered down, diverted from by stray enthusiasts and random preachers from Nazareth. The first time he appears in the New Testament is holding the cloaks when Stephen was stoned to death and became the first Christian martyr. He was not actually the noisy one in that crowd, but certainly approved of the actions of the others.

Now he is on the road to Damascus, on a determined mission to root out any of these new Christians to be found in the synagogues there and bring them back to Jerusalem to be dealt with there. He was completely focused, obsessed, single minded. And then, a blinding light. As he falls to the ground,

literally blinded by the light, he hears a voice speaking to him, asks why he is persecuting someone. But who? The answer comes quickly. “I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.” That’s some answer when you think about it. Jesus who was condemned as a criminal, who was executed, and whose followers are now causing so much fuss. So Paul has to be led to Damascus, suddenly blind, suddenly confused, suddenly with all he thought he knew shaken. He has to wait until an unknown and frightened man comes to help, he is filled with the Holy Spirit. He can see again, and is convinced enough by his experience to turn his life around, to choose to speak to others, more, to actually proclaim his new faith in Jesus.

So this is a big change for Paul. A complete change to his life. A strong person, interrupted, halted, and put into a completely new direction, at first against his will. He needs help to understand what has happened to him, help to get to Damascus under very different circumstances from what he expected. He needs help to understand how to live a very different life, risking everything to proclaim the truth about Jesus and those he had formerly wanted to capture and condemn.



There are times we all need help. Maybe it’s in the obvious ways – an emergency, a medical crisis, something dramatic. It’s the times when 999 is called, when people dash round to help. There are also times when the need is less obvious, when we are lonely, or stuck with something, or quietly frightened by something that is happening in our lives. Perhaps nobody is rushing around, there is no obvious panic, but we still need help.



Many of us remember clearly how others helped when we needed food and other necessities in lockdown, when we were told not go out and live our normal lives, but were instead told to stay inside. I am going to guess that most of us here had warm and safe places to be, probably a garden to sit in, televisions to watch, even books to read. There were those who did not have

all these things, had little or no space, were struggling to fill the days. Not an emergency as such, but still potentially life changing and even frightening experience. There were also those who had to carry on working, carry on doing what were possibly dangerous jobs with an unknown virus affecting those around them. They knew about life changing events, even life transforming events.



We see on our news about those who are still struggling today. Those who must leave home, all they have known, even family members, to seek safety elsewhere. Maybe they become what we call refugees, seeking refuge from situations that have changed their lives, who are forced to find a new way of life.



We know about lives that are interrupted, for the very best of reasons, like falling in love, but also for those for the worse of reasons. People, possibly we, can be strong, determined, organized. And something changes. How we meet those changes, how we cope, is the question. We can be, and are, helped by those around us. We can find faith, or it can find us. We can deepen our faith, find a new understanding of it, see it with new ideas. Not in emergencies, we may not think we need help, we may be self sufficient. But a faith in Jesus can and does change lives, give us a new purpose, and God is our help what ever happens, today, tomorrow and forever, Amen.

Julie Barham  
28 April 2022