

Good morning. May God use these words to draw us into greater love.

I'm going to read some of our Acts reading on ***The Conversion of Saul***

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Paul himself wrote in Galatians that he was overzealous as he was violently persecuting the church, which is the people. Perhaps he was a young man trying to make a name for himself. In our impatience in our own lives and in our world we are often guilty of choosing the immediate way to solve a problem: the way of force. Even as it wreaks destruction, it doesn't often work in the way we want it to. In Paul's case, his persecution had the opposite effect as people ran from the violence, they spread the good news travelling far and wide. And as martyrs were made like Stephen, more came to faith.

I wonder if that is what will happen in America. Unauthorised immigration is a problem in the US economy even as authorised immigration brings life and renewal. Reliable estimates put the number at around 11 million. But it is a complicated problem. If you are young and brash, or maybe just brash, I can see a temptation to solve this problem with a hammer, like the careless way that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE are violently pursuing whoever they think are unauthorised immigrants. Yet in their zeal they have killed at least two US citizens for being observers. And in their zeal, they are arresting people who are legal immigrants and stripping them of their human rights.

Back to Saul:

³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing;^[a] so they led him by the

hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.

While Saul's eyes could not see, finally his heart could. Here is something that we all know. The end never justifies the means if the means are sinful. This is not the way of Jesus. If we choose the quick, violent, lazy way to reach an end, it distorts us as individuals and it taints the very good we are trying to achieve.

My question since I returned from the states is how did we get here? How did it become OK in the United States to demonise people to the extent that we are willing to kill them or abuse them because they have broken an immigration law, a law that may have been broken for economic gain, but is so often broken out of desperation. And while this is a problem that requires serious and even urgent attention, when did it become OK to address this with violence in a country that professes its Christianity so vocally?

And is it significant that the majority of people who are being abused and targeted have a different colour skin or are from a different ethnic origin. Is it easier to treat the other, someone perceived as different, without justice?

The Holy Spirit leads Paul to Annanias who prays over him and his sight is restored. Afterwards he remained with the disciples in Damascus For several days, ²⁰ and immediately he began to

proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus^[d] was the Messiah.

And this was a miracle, Nothing short of a lightening bolt from the sky could have opened the eyes of Saul's heart and made him Paul. And God used Paul to change the world. He is our link with the Christian faith, it was his ministry to the Gentiles that brought the good news to us.

The thing is, in the beginning of the story Paul thought he was doing the right thing.

Sometimes when we are in the midst of what we think of as normal life, circumstances around us are erupting that require us to be willing to wake up and notice who is suffering without laying blame or hiding behind personal defences. The only way to ensure that atrocities do not continue over and over is to let the light of truth, of Christ, into some of our own assumptions and biases so we never come to the place which allows horror to grow, people to suffer in the dark, where violence inevitably erupts.

Last November our PCC signed the Covenant of Racial Justice. It is a covenant written by our diocese at the encouragement of the national church. This covenant requires us to whole heartedly become aware of where racial injustice exists and could grow, to recognise and acknowledge our own unconscious bias.

And you may ask in a community that is largely white, do we have such bias. My answer is absolutely; we are simply even more unaware as racial tension isn't in the forefront of most of our daily existence, and we look at the beautiful people of Black, Asian and Minority ethnic backgrounds in our midst and reassure ourselves that surely we are not part of the problem. And sadly, it is in peaceful places such as ours where we may feel complacent that this injustice can grow in the dark simply through our lack of awareness, of understanding, of curiosity about what it is like to be the other person. If we ignore this imperative to examine the eyes of our own hearts, we run the risk of joining the trend towards lazy, violent solutions in our world today. Conversion becomes harder and harder to achieve the further along the road away from the love of Christ we travel.

In a few weeks we will all have the opportunity to attend a workshop that will help us understand unconscious bias and the complexity of racial injustice in our world now. We are also all

invited to join our Lent Course, Let Justice Fall, a bible study of the book of Amos.

Jesus calls us to be a light in this place, each one of us in love, in peace and in wisdom. Dare we invite the holy spirit to open the eyes of our hearts in these coming weeks?