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## Readers' Service

by

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Number: 1

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## ORDER OF SERVICE

### CALL TO WORSHIP:

Let all the earth acclaim the Lord! Acknowledge that the Lord is God; he made us and we are his, his own people, the flock which he shepherds. [Psalm 100: 1 and 3].

### HYMN HP: 19 - With gladness we worship, rejoice as we sing

### PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING, ADORATION AND CONFESSION:

*Yes Lord 'with gladness we worship' but sometimes it is easier to sing these words than to reflect them in daily life - or even in worship itself. We come from busy confused lives, rightly and inevitably conscious of our own and other people's needs, and anxiety, rather than gladness, dominates our thinking. But, when we pause to think, there has been so much to be grateful for and to cause us to be glad, so we do indeed acknowledge you as a 'bountiful God' and join with all Creation for the way you have provided for us - for our physical and material needs, for our senses with a world of beauty, purpose and meaning and for our need as people by putting us in families, with friends, and, at this time, in fellowship with your people. Forgive us that these daily experiences are so easily taken for granted - that we are so often more conscious of the little we lack than the bounty we have. God, we acknowledge you as Creator - we are part of that Creation.*

*But, we are also people 'redeemed by thy Son', shown the way to live in your world by His pattern of loving concern and relationships; we see in Him the extent of that love by His sacrificial self-giving and the power of love in the triumph of the Resurrection - but we restrict that love, we fail to believe the promise of His presence with us to enable us to live as people who behave as if they have been redeemed from restricted, selfish, limited living and we slip back to our familiar ways. Help us in our worship to marvel again at that Redemption in Jesus and to believe His promise of His powers available to us.*

*And then we would really live as those who have been 'renewed by thy Spirit'. We sing the words but the Spirit, which has dominated the lives of so many ordinary Christian people down the years, seems remote from our situation, with so little of its dynamism working in our lives. From the first Upper Room the disciples went into the streets to proclaim and to reveal good news. Help us to share their expectation and then their experience.*

*So, bless us in our worship and beyond our worship. Be with us in the variety of our conditions, our needs and our expectations. Be with those who cannot join with us but who remember us now in their homes, and in their situation of need, and help us to go from this place - as your disciples are always called to go out, living as those who have been with Jesus.*

*We ask this for His name's sake. Amen.*

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN HP: 474 - Help us, O Lord, to learn

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON: ACTS 9:1-19

LESSON FROM THE EPISTLE: GALATIANS 1:11-24

HYMN HP: 767 - Give me the faith which can remove

SERMON (SEE ATTACHED SHEETS)

HYMN HP: 423 - Lord, I was blind! I could not see

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:

*And now, Father, rejoicing in that awareness we have of your love for us, our call to be used in your service, and the needs of those with whom you have put us to share your world, we remember that world in the peace of this building for we have not come to escape from it but to serve you in it. We recall the images on television screens and in our newspapers that we have seen this past week and if we have not physically closed our eyes to what we have seen, we have allowed the scales of familiarity and weariness to dull the impact. Now we ask you to take those scales away and, before you here, recall the wounded bodies, the desolate lives, the anxious parents, the bereaved survivors. Like Paul, we remember that these are our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and we pray for those who are the hands and minds of Christ in these situations; those who seek to bring healing, comfort, sympathy and understanding; those who try to persuade those with power and influence to use it justly and wisely and those whom we in some small measure can help by our giving and our praying. 'God so loved the world' is the faith we share, we pray again now for that world in its need.*

*And we pray, too, for need as it is experienced in the lives of those more immediately linked to us - those bound to us by ties of family, friendship and community. Like us, Lord, many of them have what we choose to call the material necessities of life but there is sickness, there are limitations of age and situation, there is bereavement - recent or long ago - still leaving an aching void and when we pause to consider, so much of this suffering is close to our situation. Forgive us that again we turn our eyes away from what is happening and what we could be privileged to do - the visit, the listening, the easing of burdens and responsibilities, the chance to show something of the mind of Jesus by that sympathy and concern that marked His ministry. Lord, as we pray, so help us to live! So we pray for our individual and collective response, for that God-given power, recognised by the Early Christians, to witness by showing the love of God in action. We pray for the whole life of our Church and for all of us who are called to witness through it and beyond it. Take 'the veil from our faces' that we may see again the vision that can inspire us and 'the veil from our hearts' that we may feel the call to respond.*

*In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.*

**OFFERTORY AND DEDICATION**

**HYMN HP: 798 - O Loving Lord, who art for ever seeking**

**BLESSING**

## SERMON

Text: Acts 9:18 'Scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see'

There is no more significant event in the story of the growth of the Church, as Luke tells it in the Acts of the Apostles, than the account of Paul's conversion - probably also no more familiar story - and the very familiarity of it, with its supernatural dimensions can also sometimes make it rather off-putting for later generations who somehow feel they are expected to have similar experiences. We can warm to the 'minor characters' in the wings - men who would otherwise be major figures in their own right, and many sermons have been preached showing the parts Stephen and Ananias played in the story. We marvel at the courageous way in which Stephen stood up before the Council and faced a martyr's death with an attitude that so closely mirrored Jesus' Crucifixion. We equally empathise with the hesitation of Ananias when he was instructed to go and meet 'Saul the Persecutor' and wonder that he could subsequently go to him and greet him with the incredible 'Brother Saul'. Yes, we are fairly at ease with this superb human obedience and compassion but heavenly voices, dazzling lights, companions who are variously described as 'seeing' or 'not seeing' visions, 'hearing' or 'not hearing' voices, take us into an unfamiliar world which is outside our experience. Attempts to reconcile the details of the conversion stories in Luke's narrative and in Paul's two defences before his accusers make little progress - perhaps Paul himself would have been uncertain and probably indignant had we challenged him about '*what actually happened*' but he knew very clearly *what it meant!* In the words of the man in John's gospel whom Jesus cured, Paul might have said: "*One thing I know, I was blind but now I see.*" Jesus had in fact made a blind man physically able to see but in His Ministry, again and again, He picked up Isaiah's image of 'physical blindness' as a parable of men's inability to see spiritual truths. When the disciples were unable to understand the parables in Mark chapter 4, Jesus lamented about those who were "*for ever seeing but never perceiving*", and this was an accurate picture of Paul before his conversion. He would have been totally convinced that he could 'see' God's purposes as well as any man and his place in them but only now was the preceding blindness to be ended, and the rest of Acts was to be largely a testimony to the reality of the new insights revealed to Paul, to the way he responded to them, and to the way in which his own ministry had always to be a response - not only to what happened on the road to Damascus - but to how Ananias freed him for the life ahead.

Paul had always been a 'religious' man; it would never have occurred to him to doubt the existence of the God of the Old Testament, or even of the adequacy of the revelation in the Law and the Prophets of God's will and purposes, particularly for his chosen people. Paul had been meticulous in his religious observance and while it would be unfair to accuse him of all the faults of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, it would probably have struck him as a fairly accurate description of what "GOD" expected of him. Whether or not Paul actually saw Jesus during His earthly ministry is uncertain but he certainly knew of Him by repute and he did not like what he heard. Had he known the word, Paul would have dismissed 'Incarnation' as a pagan concept - the essential monotheism of his faith would preclude any need for a further revelation of God, such as the Christians were affirming. In a word, he would probably have said he could 'see' what God was like as well as any man. Only afterwards did he recognise his 'blindness' - the incompleteness of the understanding he had inherited and the inadequacy of the legalistic response he felt it demanded from him. With

hindsight he would come to see how the message of the prophets needed the ministry of Jesus to complete it. We must not minimise the high moral tone of the understanding Paul had - nor, indeed, ever forget the debt that we owe to the faith in which Jesus Himself was nurtured, but Paul came to recognise that God *"who spoke through the prophets in various ways, has spoken in these latter days by His Son"* - his 'religion' had blinded him to the revelation that was there for him and it needed the Damascus Road experience and Ananias' visit to 'remove the scales'.

And inevitably Paul came to see himself in a new light too - the 'old Paul' never completely disappears from the scene and, years later, he would still tell the crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3) that he was *"a Jew born in Tarsus, thoroughly trained in the law, just as zealous for God as any of you ..."*! As a CV for a Rabbi it might have been convincing but it fits uneasily on the convert. The Philippian church, too, would later be reminded that he was *"circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews"* etc, but the very depth of his heritage testifies to the miracle of the change he underwent; he was always proud of what he had been but this made him even prouder of what God had done to him. The very things he had counted gain he now considered *"loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ"* and thus he reckoned himself as *"chief of sinners"*, *"not fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the Church of GOD."* Paul had to balance this appropriate humility with the situations in the early Church that called out for an authoritative, agonizing, teaching voice but again and again he marvelled at the new situation he was in as he recognised how blind he had previously been to those failings in his religious life as a Jew.

And if he now saw Jesus as the fullest revelation of the God he had always tried to serve, and realised the inadequacy of any response he could make, there was a third consequence to the freedom from the scales that blinded him - he saw other people differently too. Whether his links with the Damascus Church began immediately after his conversion or whether, as he implies in Galatians, it was three years later before he came back there from 'Arabia', Paul found himself in the company of people with whom he would have had little in common previously. Inevitably, most of his initial contacts were Christians who, like him, had previously been Jews, and this persisted as his missionary journeys frequently centred on the synagogues of the Diaspora - but voluntarily, or in consequence of Jewish resistance, he increasingly turned to the Gentiles - and the frustration he expressed again and again at the unwillingness of his own people to follow him into his new faith was illustrated in his frequent assertion *"henceforth I turn to the Gentiles!"*. And those Gentile contacts were so different from the people he had been in contact with previously; the picture of the Corinthian Church he paints *"not many wise, not many influential, not many of noble birth"* leads later to his amazing expression of willingness to regard a Christian who disagreed with him and who was still inhibited by the ritual limitations of his pagan background, as *"a brother for whom Christ died - I will not cause him to fall"*! Here is the recognition that led Paul to *"become all things to all men that he might thereby save some"* and to this end he travelled the known world witnessing everywhere to the universal significance of the Christ he had discovered. No wonder the Jewish co-religionists of his pre-conversion days were affronted at the mix of his contacts but the scales had been taken from his eyes and he saw all people as potentially *"children of GOD"*.

So Paul lived out the consequences of his conversion experience and, even if we have not shared his exact Damascus road conversion experience, we have to try to reflect some of the differences it made to him. Is it not fair to claim that we who would seek to be Jesus' disciples in our day must still pray to have the scales taken from our eyes so that we may see Him, see ourselves and see our fellow-humanity with something of Paul's liberated vision? We still face the danger of a legalistic, restrictive faith in a God who is far more Old Testament than New Testament-based and Christians still manage to be worried about whether to follow a Mosaic injunction or the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. It is on Jesus, and only on Jesus, that our faith centres and we are still at the risk of an exaggerated sense of our own importance. We need to echo Burns' plea that "*such grace the gods might give us to see ourselves as others see us*" and, more importantly, as God sees us - with all our limitations, yet promised forgiveness, and, therefore, empowered to serve Him. And, in a fragmented world, a fragmented society and, sometimes, a divided Church, we need to look out on those around us, particularly those whom we find it less easy to be drawn to, and see in each one, as Paul did, a "*brother for whom Christ died*". The verse of an old hymn - not now found in Hymns & Psalms or MHB, used to read:

*But of all Thy rich graces, this grace Lord impart  
Take the veil from our faces, the veil from our heart.*

That veil, those scales, prevent us so often from being the people God wants us to be; by His grace may we, too, come to rejoice: "*One thing I know, once I was blind - now I see.*"