**Reflections 4-10 May - A change of perspective**

**Bible study on Acts 9:1-6,(7-20)**

**Begin with an opening prayer**

Ever-loving God,
as we gather together in worship,
may we glorify your name.
Help us to make the most of this time together,
sharing honestly with one another
as we participate in this story of faith.
May we offer you our all and be glad when
you lovingly change our perspectives.
**Amen.**

**Read the passage**

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

Acts 9: 1-6, 7-20

 **9**Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest **2**and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3**As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4**He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

**5**“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. **6**“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

**7**The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **8**Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. **9**For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

**10**In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

**11**The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. **12**In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

**13**“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. **14**And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

**15**But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. **16**I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

**17**Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18**Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, **19**and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. **20**At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

**Explore and respond to the text**

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

**Bible notes**

Paul (then known as Saul) approved of Stephen’s stoning and began to persecute the Church (Acts 7:58–8:3), pursuing the disciples of Jesus who had taken their faith as far as Damascus in Syria. Belonging to ‘the Way’, they understood their acceptance of Jesus as the right way of understanding the Jewish Scriptures, just as the Dead Sea Sect at Qumran argued that in their interpretation of Scripture they were ‘those who have chosen the Way’ (see The Damascus Document 9:18). Paul was ‘persecuting the Church’ because he was ‘far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors’ than others (Galatians 1:14-16). But it was while violently preserving the status quo that his perspective was radically changed, leading him to interpret his Jewish Scriptures afresh in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The blinding light and regained sight recall Simeon’s description of the infant Jesus as ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles’ (Luke 2:32), itself drawn from the prophetic vision of Israel as the servant given by God ‘as a light to the nations’ (Isaiah 49:6). The persecutor Paul now shares the vision of the persecuted Stephen (Acts 7:56,22:20). The risen Jesus is the suffering servant of his people (9:5), whose sufferings Paul will share (9:16) as God works in him to fulfil Israel’s calling. Paul later recalled that the Lord had said, ‘I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light’ (26:17-18).

The high priest’s posse accompanying Paul lead him away, ‘and for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank’ (9:9). This suggests his participation in Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, death and burial (see Romans 6:1-4). In Damascus, Ananias, the disciple of Jesus, has also received a vision, responding as the prophets responded, ‘Here I am, Lord’. Ananias finds the courage to go to Paul at Straight Street. By Ananias’ touch and teaching the scales fall from Paul’s eyes and, filled with the Spirit, he participates in Jesus’ risen life, greeted as ‘brother’ by the courageous man whose life he had threatened.

 **Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

Actors become so well known for playing one particular role, such as Daniel Radcliffe as ‘Harry Potter’, that it is hard for them to be seen as anything else. Perhaps it is the same for us when people won’t let us forget a mistake we made when we were young. Saul was well known for hating and targeting Christians, yet through a dramatic encounter with Jesus he was transformed and became known as Paul, the great Christian missionary. Similarly, in the Gospel reading, Peter might have been stuck with the label of the ‘person who denied Jesus in his hour of need’. But Jesus restores their relationship and commissions Peter for a new ministry. The perspectives of both Paul and Peter are both radically changed. How has encountering Jesus changed us and how we live? Can people see a difference in us?

**Questions for reflection**

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**Questions**

* What new insights about the conversion of Paul does this artwork offer us?
* How did both men change from their encounters with God and through meeting each other?
* What situations or circumstances in your life would benefit from a new vision or change of perspective?

  **A prayer to end the Bible study**

We go from this place with perspectives changed.
May we have eyes to see you at work
in our lives and community.
May we have words of love to offer to people
society often shuns.
May we trust and obey your call on our lives.
**Amen.**