

## 5<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER      Year B

In Syria there is a small village called Deraya which stands on the ancient road between Damascus and Jerusalem. Like thousand of other rural settlements, it looks remarkably unimpressive – especially since it began to bear the terrible scars of a vicious civil and religious war. Most of the Syrian inhabitants are not sure why their village is called Deraya, but Christians are. In Arabic the name Deraya means “the vision”. Something that happened on the Jerusalem- Damascus road gave this village its name. For it was there, according to tradition, that the persecutor Paul encountered the Christ.

The small Catholic chapel in Deraya stands – or it used to do - as a memorial to the most significant conversion in the early Church, when the man who went out of his way to hunt down Christians was confronted by the God who went out of *his* way to meet his persecutor. Saul believed that his vocation from God was the persecution of the Christian community. As he declared:

***I once thought it was my duty to use every means to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene. This I did in Jerusalem; I myself threw many of the saints into prison, acting on authority from the chief priests, and when they were sentenced to death I cast my vote against them..... my fury against them was so extreme that I even pursued them into foreign cities. (Acts 26:9-11)***

Whatever actually happened on the road to Damascus, Paul states his new beginning from that experience. He never claimed that his change was just an afternoon episode: his conversion *began* on the Damascus road and continued throughout his life. For the first three years of his new life Paul underwent a wilderness novitiate in the Arabian desert. After that he went to Damascus, where he managed to throw the Jewish colony into complete confusion. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, he did that by demonstrating that Jesus was the Christ..... a real affront to traditional Jewish believers who still waited for the coming of the Messiah and would in no way believe that the criminal from Nazareth, who had been crucified, was he. The new missionary escaped with his life when he was lowered from the city walls in a basket. That undignified exit was the first of many escapes.

Paul’s story is picked up in today’s first reading. He escapes to Jerusalem where he tries to join the disciples, but he is in for a rude awakening. The

disciples are all afraid of Paul; they simply cannot believe that he has really changed. Given Paul's punishing track record, the disciples' suspicion seems all too reasonable. By his own admission, Paul had signed the death warrants of Jerusalem Christians; now he seems to expect ready admission into their inner circle. Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement", takes charge of the new arrival. He introduces Paul to the apostles, telling them the story of his conversion and recent preaching.

We are not told if the apostles are impressed, only that Paul begins preaching in the city. But then he does the same favour for Jerusalem that he did for Damascus – he causes a riot and turns his hearers into willing assassins. Another deadly response, another security operation, another emergency exit. And when he is gone, Luke tells us, the churches in the region are now left in peace. With the dynamite shipped back north, the churches can breathe easily again.

But not for long. Paul refuses to go into hiding or retire from his new career; he cannot, because he believes that he has been appointed by God to be an apostle and a missionary. For all his belief in the divine authority of his appointment, however, the burden of his past never seems to leave him completely. Paul's apostleship is never effortless – he admits that he appears before people in fear and trembling. He is always anxious to prove that he is as good as the other apostles, that he preaches the same message, that he has been chosen by the same Christ, and even that he suffers more than they do for the sake of the Gospel.

That need to overcome any suspicions about his authenticity makes Paul an energetic preacher, a tireless traveler, a fierce debater. He is no "yes man" submitting to authority in a mindless or unquestioning way. He is a great and authentic human being: he is sensitive, impulsive, obstinate, moody, thoughtful, demanding, driven, caring. His idealism is tempered by his sense of realism, and his own struggle always serves to educate his spirituality.

Above everything Paul's great lesson to us is his abiding love. He was a man who longed for friendship and the affection of people. As he wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians: "I may have hurt you, but if so I have hurt the only people who could give me any pleasure... it was not to make you feel hurt but to let you know how much love I have for you." It sounds like a lover's quarrel. The poet Robert Frost could have been speaking about Paul when he wrote:

**And were an epitaph to be my story I'd have a short one ready for my own  
I would have written of me on my stone <I had a lover's quarrel with the world.>**