

Sermon preached for Trinity 16, September 24th 2023, by The Revd Prebendary Gillean Craig, for the fifth anniversary of his retirement as Vicar of the Parish

For sixteen years, I preached at you, and I'm here again with a sort of coda, a footnote, an afterword, and all due entirely, of course, to the generous kindness of your vicar. Emma, I do thank you for this little footnote to my time here.

At the heart of the City of London, a place where perhaps wealth, privilege, power are most clearly concentrated, there is an extraordinary sculpture. It shows a person, falling off his horse. There are many fine equestrian statues throughout this great metropolis, but they are largely, well, aside from this one, entirely signs of power and magnificence: monarchs and field marshals in their victory and in their finery.

But this one shows the very opposite. What can be more embarrassing or demeaning than to fall off your horse? But there it is. I refer, of course, to the remarkable sculpture over the Great West Portico of St Paul's Cathedral, that Cathedral whose red buttons and braid I am still proud to wear.

It shows the subject of our second lesson, the Conversion of St Paul, I shall give you a quick precis of what it is about. It is about St Paul.

Paul had become the great leader of the movement to get rid of the terrible heretics who are following Way of Jesus (they are not yet called Christians, but followers of the Way), and he goes armed with the authority of the chief priests and rulers. He has shown himself as the most effective and powerful opponent of these followers of Jesus and is on his way down to Damascus to root them out, to bring them back in chains, and indeed, God help us, to condemn them to death, if it comes to that.

But Paul is, of course, overcome by a great, blinding light, in this case, literally blinded. He falls off his horse, there in the dust of that road, he hears a voice – it is the voice of Jesus, whom he has been persecuting, and then something strange happens, so strange it is the bit people often miss out. He has had this terrifying, transformative encounter, and the voice of Jesus says this, "Get on your feet and stand up" and he does. He is given his task, his life's work, and he is led to Damascus, where he will begin to carry it out.

This remarkable, wonderful, rich story contains within it several wonderful ironies.

Firstly, it is when Paul is struck blind, that he finally sees the truth. Instead of going to Damascus in his own power, he has to be led by the hand, because he can't see where he is going.

And it is then that he finds his true path and his true direction. It's a fantastic story. And I want to suggest to you that it didn't take place two thousand years ago in the Near East, but that it takes place here and now, because it is the kernel of the experience of our Christian faith and our discipleship.

Get off, as we say, get off your high horse, get down in the mud and so often our encounters with God require this moment of contrition and confession. We have to give up acting in our own power.

Paul is completely clear what God wants him to do and utterly powerful in carrying it out. He knows that God wants him to get rid of this terrible new heresy, which is vitiating the worship of the God of the Israelites.

At time, we are wrong, at least some of us, almost all of us wrong and we need to acknowledge it and confess it. We too, are blinded from time to time, by the glorious light of God.

Maybe we need to fall off our horse to acknowledge it and to realise it, and for it actually to touch us and to change us.

St Paul, as I said, acknowledges truth, not from his high horse, but as he lies in the dust of the road.

That's when he realizes what truly is, and what God's truth is, and what God's task for him will be – the very opposite of what he thought it was.

At that moment, the voice of Jesus saying, "Stand up! Get on your feet! There's a task for you, there's work to be carried out. There is a Gospel to proclaim."

I often think that the primordial, the absolute action of Jesus throughout all his ministry, within all his teaching, is not to thrust people down to their knees, that they may kneel in abject adoration,

No, from the word go, it is to raise people up to their full stature of women and men, beloved of God; to raise us up, you and me, to our full stature, beloved children of Almighty God. It is not a thrusting down but a raising up.

And I offer you this threefold pattern as yes, of course, what takes place here in church, in every act of worship, but also what goes through our whole lives, if our ears, our hearts, our minds are open.

We become aware of how much we place ourselves in the path of God, knowing what's right, knowing what's true, knowing what we have to do, and knowing above all that we are at the centre of everything.

Nowadays we are encouraged by almost every means to believe that we are the Captains of our souls, and we have utter charge and control of our destiny. It is up to us; we are in charge.

Those of us who have put on Christ by baptism know that there is a far greater thing.

We are, to be technical about it, contingent beings, we hold our being; we hold our value, our integrity, our very persons, from our loving Father, who creates us and holds us in life, moment by moment by moment,

We live, at the deepest level and above all, not for ourselves, but as God's beloved children. That is how we are. Sometimes, possibly always, we need to get off our high horse to recognise and acknowledge that fact. For then, blinded by the light of God's glorious and wonderful truth, God speaks to us, if we have ears to hear and open hearts and minds, not just in prayer and praise and glorious music, wonderful though all those things are.

God speaks to us in every way, wherever there is some truth, and usually if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is taken seriously, it's always in rather unexpected or very unexpected, surprising, even shocking ways, if we are open to the presence of God, we will hear things to begin with, that seem extraordinarily uncomfortable, awkward, but that is the prophetic voice of God.

But then thirdly, we are not to be struck down and confounded, by this perception of truth, new truths, which come to us through other people, from situations, from the news, from everything – no, we are empowered by God to get up, rise to our feet, for there is work to be done, life to be lived. There are many drawings of St Mary Abbots. Perhaps the two which I most relished most in my time here is firstly, where it is located. Here we are at the very heart of Kensington, at this great T-junction, with Kensington going on all around us. We're not set apart, in some sort of quiet, decent place, where we can just go off together to some cosy club . No, we are right at the heart and in the centre of life in this place, in all its glory and wonder, in all its horror and misery.

Secondly, it is the openness of this church, yes, the doors are still open, as they should be.

Our doors are open, to West, to North and to South, and I note with great joy, how much that openness is being enhanced at this very moment with the construction of the ramp.

And that openness, of course, works both ways. It means that we are open to all that comes in, from whatever source, all those things that make for that particular message of change and transformation and new life and hope that we need to hear at this moment.

The doors are open, so there is no impediment to us rising to our feet, going out and living God's love, hope, peace, joy, and transformation. Paul had to fall from his horse to encounter the living God, well, perhaps that's a small part of what we need to do.

But it's a pattern, a pattern that I commend to you, that threefold pattern, "Get off your high horse", be willing to be blinded by the glorious light of God's truth and joy, and then get up on our feet, go out and build the Kingdom.

Thanks be to God.