

Calling an Enemy to Life (Acts 9:1-19)

In this account of the conversion of Saul a number of different labels are used for Christians. As we think of the meaning behind each label and how it relates to this conversion account we find some deep insight as to what it means to be a Christian.

Name Calling in our Contested Culture

I said last week that we live in an increasingly contested culture. People are now less willing to allow other people to hold or speak about their own views. Indeed, opposing views are often portrayed as dangerous and in need of being silenced.

One technique increasingly being used to silence the opposition is to use derogatory names for your opponents.

Snowflakes

So, for example you will sometimes see liberal young people who insist on politically correct language, being labelled as snowflakes.

It is a name, that conjours up something that is overly fragile and plays on the liberal emphasis of the importance of acknowledging everyone's uniqueness, just as every snowflake is apparently unique.

However, this is not the name that 'snowflakes' would use for themselves. They might use a term like, 'progressives' or 'liberals'.

Gammon

On the opposite side, those who hold on to traditional values and ways are sometimes called 'Gammon'. This comes from the idea that people sometimes get flushed red faces as they argue for issues like Brexit or family values.

But of course, Gammons would not refer to themselves as 'gammon', but might call themselves 'conservatives' or 'traditionalists.'

What do you call people who follow Jesus?

So, those are some of the names people use in our contested culture, but what do you call people who follow Jesus?

Well I think the answer is it depends who you are!

Some people who are anti might use a label like 'Bible basher,' but we ourselves are perhaps happier with the more universal name: 'christian.'

And yet, this name for followers of Jesus was not the original name. A little later in Acts, Luke tells us:

"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:26)

So what were Christians called before that point? Well in Acts, there are a number of labels given to Christians and it is interesting to see who Luke shows using them.

Today's reading is probably one of the better known stories in the Bible as it tells the conversion of Saul, who later became the apostle Paul. It is an important story as it is told three times in the book of Acts, and Paul refers to the events a number of times in his letters.

But as we read this particular account, notice that there are actually 5 different labels applied to what we might simply call Christians.

Luke, the narrator calls them disciples. (vs. 1, 10, 19).

Saul the persecutor refers to them as 'belonging to the Way.' (2)

Ananias arguably uses three different labels:

- Saints (13)
- those who call on your name (14)
- Brothers (17)

I think the labels are important and help us to understand what is going on with this conversion. It is also important to see who uses each of the labels for Christians. So let's consider each of the labels and see how they help illuminate the account of Saul's conversion.

Disciples

The first label is 'disciples'. This is probably the second most common name for Christians used in Acts and in this passage, Luke as he tells the story uses it as the fall back label for Christians.

It is an important word, because at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the apostles to go and make, 'disciples' of all nations. A disciple is someone who is learning from and becoming like their master. This is what we are fundamentally called to be as Christians, to learn from and become more like Jesus.

I wonder, though, how many people that call themselves, 'Christian' truly see themselves as disciples. The word, 'Christian' is quite a passive label, but the word, 'disciple' is more active. It suggests a desire to grow and develop and to undergo activities like coming to church, reading your Bible and praying to help that happen.

- Some people even say, that the reason many people did not return to church after the pandemic, is because they did not see themselves as disciples. Church had become a habit and when the habit was broken by lockdown, there was no longer a reason to return to it.

Yet, if you see yourself as a disciple, then you will be eager to return to church, because that is one way you grow and serve as a disciple.

So, 'disciples' is a fundamental way of describing Christians.

But, it was these disciples, that Luke tells us, Saul was threatening to murder and was having arrested.

Belonging to the Way

The second name given to Christians comes in verse 2: 'those belonging to the Way.' This is the way Saul describes Christians when he asks the High Priest for permission to go and arrest the ones in Damascus. In other words it is a name used by an enemy of Christians.

The phrase, 'The Way' is used at other times in Acts, but each time it is used by people who are enemies of Christians, rather than by Christians themselves. So in chapter 19, the members of the

Jewish Synagogue that didn't believe Paul's teaching are said to have 'Maligned the Way.' Later on when there is a big riot in Ephesus it is described as a great disturbance about the Way. In Acts 22, Paul himself says he persecuted followers of the Way.

In other words, it seems that this name's usage is linked with persecution of Christians. Perhaps it is a bit like people using the word, 'snowflake' or 'gammon' today as name calling. It was used as a name to deride Christians.

But how might it have derided Christians? And why was it used of Christians at all?

It's origin may have come from the fact that in John 14:6, Jesus calls himself, 'the Way' or from the parable in the sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls on his disciples to follow the narrow, 'Way,' rather than the broad Way that leads to destruction.

So, why is it a way of deriding Christians? Christianity may have been originally seen as a distinctive way of following the Jewish religion that was despised by those holding on to the old traditions. So, perhaps the name is a kind of short-hand for 'the so-called Way.'

Yet, it was a useful label, because it cuts out the heart of the Christian message. To call it, 'the Way,' is to focus on the annoying distinctives, whilst ignoring the person at the heart of it: Jesus. This then ignored the claims about the death and resurrection of Jesus that was at the heart of the Christian gospel and was what gave it its power.

To be a disciple requires a master to follow.
To follow a Way needs no master.

The name Way neutralises Christianity of its power, whilst leaving a reason to persecute it.

So, Saul saw himself as seeking to silence a group of people following a new philosophy that seemed to challenge the traditional Jewish outlook he had grown up with and was deeply committed to.

Yet, as he travelled to Damascus to carry out this mission, something radical happened. A bright light shone around him and Jesus spoke to him from heaven. What Jesus said, deeply challenges Saul's outlook.

Jesus says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

In other words, although Saul thought of his work as stamping out a way of thinking and acting. Jesus says, what he is actually doing is persecuting a person, Jesus. Jesus is both at the heart of Christianity and identifies totally with his disciples who are being persecuted.

This revelation of Christ reveals to Saul that Christianity is not a strange Way of living, it is about a deep and profound relationship with the crucified, resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ.

This revelation would completely transform Saul's life.

- It is worth again checking about our understanding of what it is to be a Christian. It is easy to see being a Christian as just following a Way: go to church, read your Bible, pray, live the kind of life the Bible teaches and so on. These are all important, but being a Christian is first and foremost about having a relationship with the crucified Christ who died for you, the

resurrected Christ who brings new life and the ascended Christ who is Lord of all. Let's be careful not to cut Jesus out of our Christian life.

But for the moment, he is left blind and waiting to be told what to do. A physical situation that must have imitated his stunned state of mind.

Saints

So, we come to Ananias. Ananias is a disciple, who lives in Damascus. He is one of those Saul had come to Damascus to arrest.

Jesus comes to Ananias and tells him to go and meet with Saul, to place his hands on him to restore his sight.

Ananias is understandably not convinced this is a great idea. It sounds a bit too much like putting your head in the lion's mouth!

He says to Jesus, 'I have heard about the harm he has done to the saints in Jerusalem.'

Here, Ananias is referring to Christians as saints. Now we often think of saints as referring to particularly good Christians. Yet, in the New Testament it is a term used to describe all Christians. It literally means, 'Holy Ones' or those set apart as God's special people. Holy things are God's things. Saints are God's people, they belong to him,

Why does Ananias use this name here? I think because he wants to show that what Saul was doing in persecuting Christians was sacrilege. It was seeking to destroy what belonged to God. It was the equivalent of vandalising a temple. Here is someone who deserves God's judgement for a direct attack on God himself.

Later on Saul, comments on his own conversion in his first letter to Timothy:

- "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst." (1 Timothy 1:13-15)

Ananias is correct what Saul was doing was profoundly wicked and anti-God. Yet, Jesus confronted Saul not with judgement, but grace. Treating him far, far better than he deserved. This is amazing grace.

Yet, it is also a sign, that no matter how much you may feel you have gone against God in your life, Jesus's grace is always big enough to offer you salvation and welcome you as one of his disciples. If he could call Saul to salvation, he can call you too!

Those who call on Jesus' name

The second phrase Ananias uses to describe Christians is 'those who call on Jesus's name.' This perhaps more powerfully than any of the labels for Christians emphasises that to be a Christian is to enter into a relationship of deep trust of Jesus. It is a label that emphasises what is wrong with the name, 'the Way', a label that does not even suggest the need for Jesus to be a key part of the faith.

Jesus picks up on this label, when he tells Ananias what he is calling Saul to do and become.

Rather than seeking to silence, Jesus' followers, Saul will now carry Jesus's name.
Rather than persecuting and hurting Jesus's followers, Saul will suffer for Jesus's name.

Saul is being called to switch from being zealously anti-Christian, to being zealously pro-Christian.
Yet, in being called to switch sides, Saul is also being called to change his ways of campaigning.

No longer, will there be threats of violence, but a willingness to face persecution and suffering for Jesus.

Those who criticise religion today, say that religions cause wars. I think it is true that religion causes people to hold views that will profoundly conflict with the views of others. That is true of all strongly held views, whether religious or not. Yet, the question is how you carry out the conflict.

Jesus led the way for Christians not with the sword or seeking military power to force his views on people, but by going willingly to the cross, dying and rising again. Following his example, the early Christian church did not seek to impose their views by violence or threats. Rather, as Jesus called Saul to do, they carried the name of Jesus around the world, seeking to persuade people of the truth with a courage that was willing to suffer for Christ.

Such an approach does not cause wars! Yes, there have been times since then when Christians have acted more like Saul before he was converted in order to try and spread or defend the faith, but that is not the way it has to be or is even meant to be. At heart Christianity is the faith of a crucified king, not a warrior king. It does not promote violence, even though it may cause conflict.

Brothers

So, Ananias has a mission from Jesus, to go to the man who had come to Damascus to arrest people like him and pray that his blindness will be released.

Ananias as a true disciple does what Jesus commands and comes to Saul and says something deeply profound. He says, 'Brother Saul...'

In Acts the most common word used to describe Christians is: 'Brothers' or perhaps better: 'Brothers and Sisters.' It is a name that emphasises that as we come into a relationship with Jesus as our big brother and God as our Father, so we become a family, a new community.

In calling, Saul, a brother, Ananias makes clear to him, that despite what he has done in the past to hurt Christians, now he is welcomed as part of the Christian community, to be one of them.

This one word in this context speaks of Ananias's obedience to Jesus, his acceptance of Jesus's grace to Saul and his willingness to welcome Saul into the community of disciples.

- Alongside seeing ourselves as disciples, it is so important that we see ourselves as brothers and sisters of each other as well. We need to work to improve our community life, so that we can find support from one another, but also welcome new people to join and find friendship, support and company.

Even as we seek to connect more powerfully with Jesus as his disciples, lets also seek to connect with one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus.

What is in a name?

Names can be used to deride others, but the labels we give and the way we identify ourselves can also be quite profound.

In particular let's see that as Christians we are not just about following a way of living, but we are those who belong to Christ and are called to be disciples of Christ actively seeking to grow in knowledge and obedience of him, celebrating his grace towards us and others and constantly seeking to welcome new people into our communities.