



26 January 2014
The Third Sunday after Epiphany
Choral Evensong
Philippians 3 vv. 3–16
Acts 9 vv. 1–19

Travelling and Journeying

We walk by Faith and not by sight

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May I speak in the name of the living God, in whom we live and move and have our being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

In the recent bestseller, *The Examined Life*, the psychoanalyst, Stephen Grosz thoughtfully relates a number of moving but instructive stories of encounters with particular patients exploring perennial themes like deception and love and loss. In so doing he provides glimpses onto the subterranean connections in people's experiences, their journeys, their life-stories casting some light on why they do what they do; in particular on our human ability - or in many ways our curious inability - to change, or indeed sometimes to even see what is so clear and obvious to others.

He relates for example, the story of a woman whose husband is, from everything she says, very clearly having an affair, the writing is not just on the wall it is there in big flashing neon lights. Yet despite them discussing the possibility, she simply can't see it at all, until she visits the flat he lives in in Paris during the week, opens the dishwasher and just knows, immediately, that her husband simply couldn't have packed it: 'It was as if she had left me a note' she commented to the bemused therapist.

He also relates the case of a depressed and difficult male patient, Peter. Following an initial period of therapy Peter, ended the sessions abruptly and a little later, very sadly, Stephen Grosz received a letter from Peter's fiancé informing him that his former patient had become increasingly disturbed and tragically had taken his own life. The letter expressed gratitude for all that he had tried to do to help.

Six months after writing a letter of condolence to his fiancé, and after the inevitable soul-searching, Stephen Grosz received a phone call - from Peter - who confessed to having written the letter, spoke of how touched he was by the warm sentiments expressed to his fictional fiancé and wanting to come back for more therapy. In their subsequent meetings it became quite clear that Peter had a deep emotional investment in upsetting and shocking people. A pattern, it turned out which was deeply rooted in childhood, and on speaking honestly and openly to his mother and biological father he came to discover that the account he had been given of his happy time as a very small child was entirely false; indeed that he had been subject to repeatedly violent treatment by his heavy drinking parents whose relationship was breaking down. Internalising the trauma, he had spent his life ensuring he was never the vulnerable one, as the therapist summed up his experience:

'I'm the attacker who traumatises, never the baby who is hurt'

with the consequence that again and again, uncomprehendingly, he caused pain and distress to others.

This is, of course, one of the most simple but persistent insights from the 'talking therapies', namely that profound experiences, most powerfully in childhood can frequently leave within us stories of which we are not conscious, scripts which we simply act out. Scripts that shape and determine our experiencing of the world, that create self-fulfilling patterns which we come to read as 'just how the world is': So, inevitably, 'it always happens to me' or 'people are just like that' - unless we are able to see, to understand and to give voice to those stories. The case of Peter is simply an extreme and pathological example of this broader truth.

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As Grosz puts it:

When we cannot find a way of telling our story, our story tells us – we dream these stories, we develop symptoms, or we find ourselves acting in ways we don't understand.'

And so, on this, the day after the feast for the Conversion of St Paul, I have chosen to look briefly at perhaps the most dramatic and well-known personal journey in the Bible as narrated by Luke in the book of Acts and looked back upon by Paul himself.

In Acts, we find Saul, 'breathing out threatenings and slaughters': A man on a mission, a man in the right - or perhaps someone acting in ways he doesn't fully understand: a Nationalist, zealous for the independence and the purity of the Jewish nation with no place for Romans, no time for the Greeks; a rising star of the popular religious conservative movement, the Pharisees; a self-appointed campaigner against dangerous pagan and secular trends. And in this new religious cult, Christianity, he finds so much to hate – their openness to the Gentiles; their criticism of Temple worship; their devotion to their crucified Messiah. What's not to despise.

Yet as a Pharisee, as one with an avowed, zealous, absolute commitment to the law at the heart of which sits the 10 commandments including 'thou shalt not kill', he has already watched over in approval as a frenzied mob killed an early Christian leader, by all accounts a righteous man.

Yet Saul, driven by dreams and fantasies of purity and of a resurgent and free Jewish nation (a mindset hardly unfamiliar in our own world) – seeks to hunt down and purge the land of more of such scum.

But of course, as he know so well, Saul's story is rudely ruptured; he has a breakdown. In the gratuitous literalization of a metaphor - he is made to see that it is he that is blind; that the basis for his identity, his mission, the narrative he has constructed about his life and its purpose is fundamentally disfigured. Disfigured by what he describes, looking back from a prison cell in his letter to the Phillippians, as his 'confidence in the flesh'; his pride, his deep investment in a particular ethnic, religious (and implicitly) social status. For he was, as he points out - not just any old Jew, rather he was circumcised at eight days – a proper Jew and not a convert; from the tribe of Benjamin, the one tribe to stay true to the House of David and Judah after the death of Solomon; a Hebrew of Hebrews, that is a native speaker; and of course a Pharisee concerned for the purity of Israel and renown for faithfulness to the Torah.

But this script of status and confidence and righteousness rooted in birth and tradition – but which he had also seen as his own achievement and the well-spring of moral worth (as so many privileged people often do) completely unravels and Saul is brought to blindness and crisis and breakdown and the discovery of a quite kind of story of who he is and could be, a story so radically different that he counts all this as '*but dung*'. Whilst fully acknowledging the past (he remains a Benjamite, a Hebrew of Hebrews), now ironically for a man writing from prison he is no longer captive, but free and able to look back upon his former self - imprisoned.

Paul has found a way of telling his story, a new story, rooted not in his 'confidence in the flesh', which has given birth to violence, but in the call to faith founded upon the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we too are called into a deeper realisation and articulation of our own stories: to know and love who we are (in the proper sense) is essential and profoundly connected to our love of others, neighbours and strangers, itself rooted in the Love that is God.

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Strangely there is something of a danger for the Christian and for Christian communities (at least) in a superficial reading and appropriation of the radical nature of Paul's story: that it itself can become a sort of script or strait-jacket: It is a danger, which Paul himself is very well aware of, the idea that upon conversion change is so radical that the Christian has arrived, is there, and should expect and be expected to live a sinless life, their failure to do so bringing despondency and despair. Such thinking is an ever-present danger within certain Christian traditions and among young Christians. They need, of course, to read on in *Philippians*, for unlike his former self, Saul, who rests upon his 'confidence in the flesh', Paul could not be clearer: I count myself not to have apprehended all the benefits of salvation, he is not there, he has not arrived. Rather the Christian journey is always one of forward momentum; '*stretching out*', '*reaching forth unto those things which are before*', '*pressing toward the mark*'. It is a daily journey, a daily conversion, a daily walk to be taken one step at a time.

And how we walk that daily journey is deeply tied up with the ways that we tell our own story and reflect upon it; how we narrate our sense of our self to others and indeed, more importantly to ourselves.

Normal everyday encounters touch frequently upon the stories we tell; we are asked questions like 'How are **you**?', 'So where is **home** for you?' or 'What is it that you **do**?' and such questions touching on our feelings about our life, on origins, on purpose can prompt us to deeper reflection. As we chose the way in which we frame our response, rehearsing lines trotted out many times or finding fresh language with which to give an account of ourselves; as we decide how much we should disclose or share about ourselves, we may, also, occasionally, catch ourselves out and think, 'is that actually true' or note a touch of boastfulness or vanity or indeed a hint of anxiety or fear in our self-narration, we may even discern something akin to Paul's 'confidence in the flesh'. How we tell our story and, of course, as importantly, how we learn to really listen to the stories of others, is then an essential prompt to spiritual awareness and the deepening of compassion as we seek to walk, not by the appearance of things, but by faith in the one who is the wellspring of all Truth and Love, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen