

Sermon 5 May 2025 Easter 3

All three readings today record unexpected and very strange encounters.

The first reading is about the conversion of Saul, who we come to know as Paul after this event. Saul is a man with a sense of purpose, there's a drivenness about him.

He's on a mission – to capture and bring to justice these unorthodox Jews who called themselves simply 'The Way'. There's an irony in this purposefulness of Saul,

because he's also on the way – physically and geographically on the way to

Damascus, but metaphysically and psychologically he's on the way to demonstrate,

to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, his loyalty to the traditions of their Hebrew

ancestors. Then there's the encounter that changes everything. It's not an immediate

change - there's a certain impetus that continues to carry him on his way to

Damascus; but for what purpose? A radically changed purpose, though Saul doesn't

quite know what that purpose will be as yet. He just knows he needs to go on to

Damascus, and the reason will become clear in due course. He has also failed to

recognise the voice that's spoken to him, even though he's a man skilled in the law of

Moses and schooled in the ancient stories of a great many encounters with the

presence of the God who speaks to his people.

In the gospel, once again we have a group of men who gather with a sense of

purpose. At the outset they seem to be at a bit of a loss for what to do – they're just

hanging out, or so it seems, until Peter take the initiative: 'Well I don't know about

you lot but I'm going fishing.' I've got to do something – I'm sure we all know such people, and perhaps we can be a bit like it ourselves at times. I've got work to do. The others follow on. It's busy work. It's doing something because these guys want to look busy and feel busy. But it's ineffective work.

We can be very efficient at doing something but if the something is going in the wrong direction, the wrong way, then it's ineffective or even counter-effective.

History is full of examples of 'it seemed like a good idea at the time.' But with the benefit of hindsight, was it really such a good idea? Was it really such a good idea for Saul to head off on the Damascus road? Or for Peter and his mates to head off back to their accustomed place of work. In both cases they get hauled back - from the familiar, from their normal, automatic, unquestioned views and behaviours, to something radically different. And interestingly the disciples, who like Saul should know better, like Saul, fail to recognise the one who stands before them and speaks to them.

In each case what is spoken is a question: 'Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Children, you haven't caught any fish, have you?' The questioner knows the answer already, in each case, but still asks. Other, similar questions follow in the gospel – 'do you love me?' Peter gets impatient – he knows that Jesus knows the answer already. 'You know that I love you!' And the command: keep going to

Damascus – you'll find out what it's all about. Keep feeding my flock – you'll see the results.

And in the midst of it all there's the invitation: 'Don't let me interrupt the direction you're going in, to Damascus – even though you'll find a different purpose there.'

And in the gospel the even simpler invitation: 'come and have breakfast.'

So this seems to be the nature of our encounters with God: unexpected, not fully recognisable at the time, they put a question to us – perhaps a question as to the value and even the common sense of what we're currently doing - and they invite us to take a new direction.

We could nod sagely at all this and say to ourselves: yes, this all makes sense, eventually. We can see the logic in this. But then, as if to keep us really on our toes, we're given this amazing and amazingly bizarre vision in Revelation, which has also been received by the church as holy scripture. It's not totally unfamiliar: it's reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision of God's glory in the temple, and there's the idea of the lamb – an idea that somehow obscurely connects the lamb, the sheep in the Abraham and Isaac story that gets sacrificed as a substitute for the human child, connects that story with the lambs and sheep Peter is being directed to care for. Here the lamb stands for both Christ and also Christ's people, at one and the same time. This paradox – to say nothing of the overwhelmingly baroque extravagance of the

vision in which it is embedded – this shatters all our categories, all our systems of thought, all the comfortable logics that we like to apply to our world. It is - mind-blowing. We just can't put it in any pre-fabricated thought-box. It's just too big and too out of control.

So why is it there, in what we call holy scripture, and associated by our lectionary writers with these two post-resurrection encounters? I want to suggest to you, and this is the only way I can think about it, that it's about the *feeling* of these encounters. It's about how Paul felt on that Damascus road, and how Peter felt when the penny suddenly drops and he jumps out to swim and wade ashore. The vision in Revelation is not so much about the details as the sheer overwhelmingness of the feeling, the felt experience of these wild moments of encounter – something that can't quite be conveyed by any mere narrative of things that happened. The vision of Revelation is about all the Easter encounters – Mary Magdalen at the tomb, and how she felt at that moment when that gardener spoke her name; about Thomas in that upper room, and how he felt when Jesus looked him in the eye and uncovered his wounds; about Cleopas and friends at that dinner table in Emmaus in the moment when the bread was broken.

