

Changing through the sacraments

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 1 May 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter 3C

Acts 9: 1-6; John 21: 1-14

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Do you identify with the conversion of Saul, later re-named Paul, which we hear read today? It does not fit us all. Yet it is certainly a striking story, which has powerfully influenced some, especially evangelical, Christian traditions. Indeed, it has sometimes become a classic model for becoming a Christian. It speaks, for example, of a remarkable repentance – or turning around, which is really what repentance means. It speaks of whole-hearted, whole-self transformation of life in Christ; and, above all, it speaks of the transforming power of God's love and grace.

All of this, we may say, are indeed important aspects of Christian Faith, and, as such, the story challenges us, like Saul/Paul, to consider the direction in which we are traveling and what is drawing us and companioning us on the way. All of these things also go to the heart of the sacrament of baptism which we were planning to share this morning. Unfortunately this has had to be postponed due to the baptismal candidate having contracted COVID-19. Nonetheless, it is still worth us reflecting today on the sacraments of baptism and of communion, which we do share together this morning. For, like Saul's conversion, what do we make of them? How does God's grace work through them, and in particular moments of our lives?

Saul/Paul's conversion is but one important story about spiritual awakening. Indeed, Luke's telling of it in the Acts of the Apostles is even more dramatic than Paul's own reports in his letters. For Luke is interested in pointing up certain aspects of human faith journeys, not least the significance of call, mission, and divine inspiration. They are important, and perhaps some of us may resonate with the dynamic of Luke and Paul's accounts.

I would guess that most of us would certainly be able to identify one or more, maybe several, key moments in our faith journeys when we felt called to change or felt change happening in us. As Penny said on Easter Day, these moments may often, as in Saul's case, happen at liminal times, such as on a journey.

Significant spiritual change may however be encountered by us quite quietly, growing slowly within us, without any great lights flashing in the sky. For true and deep spiritual change - what Christian tradition calls 'conversion' - is actually typically a lifelong process, and told through so many different human stories, each of them quite distinct. Some of the same symbols and metaphors are frequently present – whether light, or journeying, blindness and transformation – yet they appear and grow in us in such a variety of ways.

The different ways in which we experience spiritual change, or conversion, are helpful to remember when we come to share together in the sacraments. For, like the journey of faith itself, God has been experienced in many ways in the sacraments. Indeed, whilst baptism and communion are central to almost all mainstream historic Churches, they have also been at the heart of major denominational differences.

I suspect therefore that we each come to communion today with contrasting as well as complementary understandings. For example, it would be fair to say that it is mainly in the area of sacramental understanding that Penny and I still struggle with some aspects of life in the Uniting Church. Yet our differences are also opportunities for us to grow together more deeply, where we see that, like Saul's conversion, our different experiences are but ways into the life of the Spirit, not the absolute requirement or definition of faith itself.

I hope we may have an opportunity sometime to reflect together further in exploring our different understandings. However, for now let me offer three perspectives: three major pathways into living into baptism and communion. For, as theologians have said, the sacraments are like '*doors to the sacred*', holy symbols and portals through which grace may be experienced and lives transformed. Yet they can be viewed in many different ways.

A first approach to the sacraments is that associated with the greater part of the Church, throughout history, and across the world today. This 'Incarnational' approach takes particular form in the Roman Catholic Church, but, with various qualifications, is also shared by the Orthodox, parts of historic Anglicanism, and many Lutherans. This understanding emphasises the sacraments as transcendent gifts or revelations of God, as symbols of mystery and wonder. It majors on divine presence, and the re-presenting, of Christ among us.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, this eventually became solidified into the idea of transubstantiation in the Mass: that is, the transformation of the material into the spiritual, the bread and wine into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. However it is not necessary to adhere to that particular interpretation in order to view the living presence of God as central to the sacraments. Whilst such an approach to communion also remembers the Last Supper of Jesus, the real purpose is to enter into the divine presence here and now.

A second, 'Redemptive', approach to the sacraments is particularly associated with the Reformed traditions in Christianity, including parts of Anglicanism. This emphasises the sacraments as expressions of a new status, or relationship, in God, less transcendent and more matter of fact, and with more stress on human commitment and fellowship.

Indeed, whilst the most influential Reformed understandings of baptism and communion are various and nuanced, they essentially view the sacraments as ordinary things, which are made special where the Holy Spirit is present and received. In seeking to avoid 'magical' impressions in the 'Catholic' approach, this can also lead to baptism being viewed as mainly an act of commitment, and communion being as a 'bare' memorial of Christ and as a fellowship meal alone.

My view is that neither traditional 'Incarnational' nor 'Redemptive' understandings quite suffice, though each point to important aspects of what we share in baptism and communion. For, whenever we do baptise, and as we share in Communion today, we need to hold together both the transcendence of God, through whom grace is given, and the immanence of God, in our spiritual relationships in one another, with the symbols of water, bread and wine: in other words, God made a living presence in the symbols and in our selves.

For just as human beings come to God in different ways, not simply through the blinding light of today's account of Saul's conversion, so too we glimpse God in different aspects of the sacraments.

Interestingly, some Catholics have recently reinterpreted Communion as trans-signification, rather than trans-substantiation. Think about it - and apply it to baptism too. In this, instead of seeing the sacraments as moving us out of one salvific box to another, our lives and bodies take on transformed meaning. In baptism, the person baptised remains the same physical person, and the bread and wine remain bread and wine in communion, yet they are transformed in significance. For they mean something different to what came before. They themselves become doors into the sacred, in themselves and for others.

Christians have surely argued too much about exactly how and where Christ is in the sacraments. That, sadly, reflects a static way of looking at how God works. Maybe today, we can therefore move on, perhaps exploring a more 'Transformative', or 'Sanctifying' approach, placing deeper emphasis on the dynamic, 'trans-ing', nature of the sacraments. Rather than meaning one thing, rather than another, or two things at once, perhaps we do well to view the sacraments as multi-dimensional, and multi-valent. They are then not so much about substance or status, but about providing a shaping process to our lives – transposing, or translating our lives, our world, and God, afresh – expressing incarnation and the transcendent, redemption and human relationship, but also transformation on every level.

Arguably, as we see in today's Gospel reading, this also reflects the Resurrection experience of Christ coming alive in material existence. Like the breakfast on the beach, with bread and wine, and fish, each sacramental act is not just about leaving or remembering God in the past, or getting ourselves ready for a possible future somewhere else. Rather each sacrament is itself a little Resurrection, signifying, in time and place and human materiality, the coming into being of the New Creation, and the invitation of God in Christ to begin again, fortified by God's own living presence.

In Christ's Name and Resurrection Life. Amen.