

Introduction

- Reality TV has become a big thing over the last few years:
 - where you have the cameras following some quite ordinary people around, doing their normal job, at home, whatever the topic of the programme is...
 - Airline - you never knew a check-in desk could be so fascinating!
- I suspect its because we have come to distrust experts, but trust those who actually experience the situations that are being discussed day by day:
 - so, if we have a story on the news about the NHS we almost have to have an interview with a nurse or some other member of staff...
 - or, when Big Brother finished, though millions of people had been watching on the TV, we had to have interviews with the contestants to see what it had been like to be in the house...

Who is Paul?

- If you had the chance to interview just one character from the Bible, excluding Jesus, who would it be?
 - Abraham? Joseph? Moses? Joshua? Solomon? Isaiah? Jeremiah? Or one of the disciples - Peter, James or John?
- Everyone will have their own "favourite":
 - one of mine would undoubtedly be Paul
 - after all, he wrote a fair chunk of the NT!
- So who is this guy, what is he like? If we get to know him, what can we learn from his experiences? How might it help us read his letters?
 - and in particular, what place does he occupy and what can he teach us about the on-going story of the birth and growth of the church, of the spread of the gospel?

Self-righteous

- Know he was a Jew, at this point based in Jerusalem, though originally from Tarsus (top right corner Med, up from top tip of Crete, in modern Turkey); by inference probably from a wealthy family.
 - he was "in" with the religious leadership in Jerusalem, enough that he was around when they became so incensed by Stephen and stoned him to death, Paul (Saul as he was then known) was there;
 - he had a zeal for his Jewish faith;
 - he was clearly trusted by those in authority - allowed to take the lead in destroying the church.
- To Jewish eyes he had it made - a good Jew, doing well here, and setup for eternity!
 - "The boy done good!"
 - and that was probably how he thought of himself - as doing all right, as righteous before God because he observed the Jewish Law.
 - and that belief that he was doing the right was genuine; he wasn't daft, he was genuinely seeking to be good! And, in many ways, he was good at being good!

Sought

- But Paul was plunged into the world-shattering events of Jesus' death and resurrection, the birth of the early church.
- It's not clear whether he was in Jerusalem when Jesus was around - we don't know exactly how long it was between Jesus returning to his Father in heaven and the events before us;
 - possibly a few years, but not many.
- But certainly in being around for Stephen's stoning, Saul was watching, listening, pondering.
 - his reaction, on the surface at least, was hatred for any who could reject God
 - what he didn't realise was that God was seeking him - perhaps through his thinking on what he saw as Stephen died, perhaps through what the men and women he dragged off to prison had to say for themselves, or the way they

- acted?
- Jesus was not prepared to give up!
 - despite Saul persecuting the Church, **Jesus came looking for Saul**;
 - Jesus made the first move, if you like - he **sought** Saul out... **and came to meet him on the road to Damascus**

Sinner

- And so the light comes shining from heaven, blindingly bright, down on Saul and his companions.
- With one simple question, Jesus turns Saul around:
 - "**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?**"
- And with that asking, nothing will ever be the same again:
 - Jesus who was a hated, dead leader of a dangerous sect is instantly recognised as Lord!
 - Saul's whole life is turned upside down from this point on.

Why?

- first of all, because he suddenly, shatteringly realises the truth about himself;
- he is a **sinner**
- he is not righteous, as he'd thought, but evil, filthy, dirty in God's eyes!
- he is not curbing a dangerous break-away sect, he is persecuting the people of the Lord!

Saved

- The second thing that happens at that same moment in time is that he recognises not just his own sin, but also the **Lordship of Jesus**.
 - and in that twofold recognition of his **own sin** and **Jesus' Lordship** he is **saved**:
- Recognising that we are sinners says "**I can't help myself escape sin**";
- Recognising Jesus as Lord says to God, "**Only you can - will you help me?**"
- So Saul is no longer self-righteous, nor merely one sought by the Lord;
 - he is a **saved** sinner!
- This the pivot around which the whole of the rest of Saul/Paul's life would turn:
 - before he **persecuted**, afterwards he **built-up the church**;
 - before he was **self-righteous**, afterwards he recognised his only **righteousness came from Jesus**;
 - before he had **human significance** (important task, Roman citizen, etc); afterwards, though the human significance slipped away, he had a **divine significance**

Sent

- Now saved, Saul became someone **sent** on a mission:
 - not his old mission to destroy the church;
 - but a new mission from a new master - to carry Jesus' name before the Gentiles!
 - saved to serve
- First by the command to go into the city, learning obedience to his new Master, and then through Ananias and time with the other disciples comes the wider commission
- And really the rest of the section we read contains the first steps in that long journey of mission that would occupy the remainder of Paul's life:
 - (v.20) "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God."
 - (v.22) his preaching "baffled the Jews ... by proving that Jesus is the Christ"
- *Helen Roseveare story of being a sent one from a great God to tell about Jesus!!*

Suffer

- Finally, Saul begins to learn that to follow Jesus is "**to know Christ and the power**

of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:10-11)

- Jesus himself said to the disciples: (John 16:33) "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."
 - and he says to Saul, through Ananias, that not only is he a sent one to the Gentiles, he is also one who "must suffer for my name." (v.16)
- That wasn't any empty promise, nor one long-delayed in coming:
 - Saul wasn't trusted, either in Damascus or in Jerusalem - he suffered a degree of rejection by those who should have been his brothers, something that would come again and again throughout his ministry
 - people tried to kill him, again both in Damascus and in Jerusalem (slightly amusing that the church knew peace only once Saul left!!)

Conclusion

- So, when Paul warns the Galatians of the danger of losing their faith, of seeking to win their salvation by observing the law:
 - he knows what he is talking about, for he knows that his law keeping did not win salvation, only God's grace.
- Or when he writes of love to the Corinthians, he has experienced that love of Christ in his own life:
 - love that sought out the unlovely, the hating, spiteful, murderous persecutor and brought him home!
- Or when he declares that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16):
 - he has experienced that powerful salvation himself, powerful enough to turn persecutor into persecuted
- Paul is worth listening to because he has walked the road we walk:
 - self-righteous; sinner, sought, saved, sent, suffered.
 - we do well to follow in his footsteps and meet with the same Lord he encountered on the Damascus road.