

# Thursday

7 May 2020 - Klippies Kritzinger

Dear friends, this is the first of four weekly Thursday reflections within the community involved in shelters for homeless people in Tshwane. We explored the events of Holy Week, the encounters of the risen Christ with his disciples, and then looked at a few Psalms. In the next four weeks we will look at a few passages from the Book of Acts to ask ourselves how we could better embody the creativity and radicality of the early Jesus movement in the shelters we are serving.

The story of the Book of Acts doesn't make sense without the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Those are the presuppositions of everything else in this second book of Luke to his friend Theophilus. In the second major part of Acts (chapters 9-28) the main human agent in this story of drama and risk is Saul of Tarsus, who is called the apostle Paul from Acts 13:9 onwards. That is why the story of his calling by the glorified Jesus, which is told three times (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18) is a key passage to explore. The story is so well known that I want to highlight only two aspects.

## **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4)**

Of all the probing questions of the Lord Jesus recorded in the New Testament, this was the most shattering. It stopped the zealot Saul in his tracks and confronted him with the implications of his actions. As Luke tells the story of Jesus, he prayed for his torturers and executioners on the cross (Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing – Luke 23:34), but here (as the risen and ascended Lord) he does not pray for Saul. He pushes him off his feet and challenges him to his face: “Saul, Saul, why...?” Saul did not know what he was doing. He was not busy persecuting Jesus of Nazareth. That troublemaker had been removed; it was only the movement of his deluded followers that still needed to be snuffed out...

But Saul's sudden blindness made it clear to him that he was not seeing properly; he did not know who he was dealing with. He had to learn to see differently; to look at a scared group of men and women, running away from him – and to see the glorified Lord Jesus. This is how radical it is. And now we know why the same man could later write: “From now on ... we regard no one from a human point of view ... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:16-17). At the heart of our Christian faith there is this comforting (and uncomfortable) truth: “What you have done to any of the least of my sisters and brothers, you have done to me” (Mt. 25:31-46). When you touch them, you touch me.

Friends, your eyes were open – so you recognized the face of Christ in homeless men, women and children. And you opened your hearts and hands and purses and facilities to them. As winter approaches, may your efforts to advocate and organise permanent shelters for them become a reality.

## **“Brother Saul, receive your sight” (Acts 9:17)**

When we think of the miracles in the New Testament, we usually think of Jesus healing the sick, the blind and the lame, or even raising the dead; and that is true. But one of the greatest miracles in the New Testament happened when Ananias, the Christian disciple in Damascus, walked down Straight Street into the home of Judas the tanner, laid his hands on Saul and said to him ... “Brother Saul”. It was obviously not easy for Ananias to do that, as a persecuted follower of the Way, a potential victim of Saul's fierce persecution. You can imagine him saying: “Lord, Saul is the enemy. You know how much

harm he has done to your people in Jerusalem; and now he has come to Damascus to arrest us also. How do we know he is not trying to infiltrate our group by pretending to be a disciple, so that he can arrest all of us?" But the Lord convinced him to go and pray for Saul, his enemy and persecutor. The miracle of reconciliation takes place as Ananias places his hands on his former enemy and calls him "brother". This is the kind of miracle happening in your shelters. It is the kind of miracle we need in the City of Tshwane, in the whole of South Africa. We need eyes and feet and hands that can get us to walk down Straight Street, the longest journey on earth, the journey to our enemies. We need a love that sees differently; that sees the Lord Jesus not only in those who are vulnerable and marginalised but also in those who are powerful and cruel. "From now on ... we regard no one from a human point of view ... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."

**"I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language..." (Acts 26:14)**

The third time that Luke tells the story of Saul's calling (Acts 26:12-18), he adds this tiny (but hugely important) bit of information: When the ascended Lord reveals himself to Saul, he does not speak Greek; he speaks to him in his heart language. In the same way that John's Gospel tells us of his encounter with Mariam of Magdala ("Mariam!" – "Rabbouni!" John 20:16). And how on the cross he poured out his heart to God in the lament of Psalm 22: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani!" (Mark 15:34). These Hebrew (or Aramaic) words remind us that faith is not a superficial set of habits or rituals. The ascended Christ speaks to each of us deep in our hearts and minds, through the Holy Spirit, in the languages of our heart. May you experience a deep, heart to heart relationship with the homeless women, men and children in your care. May the Lord speak to you through them. And may you experience a deeper encounter with the living Lord, as you serve him by caring for those around you.

**Prayer**

Merciful God, Creator of the universe, Thank you  
for revealing yourself to us in Christ  
for raising him from the dead  
for pouring out your Spirit into our hearts

Glorified Lord Jesus, Thank you  
for stopping us in our tracks  
for opening our eyes  
for calling us to be part of your movement of justice and love

Holy Spirit, Breath of life  
Give us gentleness and patience with those who are weak  
Give us wisdom with those who are difficult and stubborn  
Give us courage with those who are evil and unjust

May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us;  
establish the work of our hands for us;  
Yes, establish the work of our hands (Psalm 90:16-17)