**Acts 9v1-20 and John 21:1-19 SA 05 05 2019 Facing the darkness within.**

What is it that makes this building and we the people in it unique? Is it that we sing a lot? Or we listen to a short talk, or in my case a long talk? Could it be that we drink coffee and eat cake ? It is an unusual mix, of concert hall, lecture theatre, an upmarket Starbucks. But the things we do are not particularly unique. But our religion is unique. That sounds rather arrogant, but the heart of our faith is the focal point of this building. The cross. An American Episcopalian preacher, Fleming Rutledge, expresses this very clearly. She writes,” Until the Gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man. The early Christian preaching announced the entrance of God upon the stage of history in the person of an itinerant Jewish teacher who had been ingloriously pinned up alongside two of society`s castoffs t die horribly, rejected and condemned by religious and secular authorities alike, discarded onto the garbage heap of humanity, scornfully forsaken by both elites and common folk, leaving behind a discredited and demoralized handful of scruffy disciples who had no status whatsoever in the eyes of anyone. The peculiarity of this beginning of a world transforming faith is not sufficiently acknowledged. Too often, today`s Christians are lulled into thinking of their own faith as one of the religions, without realizing that the central claim of Christianity, is oddly irreligious at its core.” (The Crucifixion p1 Eerdmans 2015)

So what makes us unique is a crucified and risen Lord. A person. A series of events at a point in time, that transformed our history and can change us too.

In the first and last readings this morning we hear two stories. They show how the crucified and risen Jesus changes the lives of two people.

IN OUR Gospel reading, the story is above all about Peter. It begins with Peter and the other leading disciples having gone home to Galilee. They are exhausted and have disobeyed the command of Jesus to stay in Jerusalem. The general impression is that they are men without a purpose, falling back into old patterns of behavior. But they don`t have the comfort of a catch of fish. By the time dawn arrived, they must have been feeling pretty down. When Jesus asked them if they had caught any fish. They probably roared back a very definite no. Jesus commands them to cast out their nets again. It must have ben a great shock, when after fishing for nothing all night, their nets were teeming with fish.

John immediately recognized it as the work of Jesus and tells Peter, “It is the Lord.” On hearing this Peter grabs his clothes and jumps overboard to meet with Jesus. “The actions of both disciples are in character, the one being first to discern the Lord and the other to take action.”( Morris The Gospel according to John p 864. Eerdmans 1971)

After the disciples have got the catch on shore, Jesus meets the most important need of the disciples. They need some food and warmth. So Jesus has already prepared breakfast and a fire is glowing

The risen Christ commissions Peter to both “tend” and “feed” his sheep. Jesus’s threefold questioning of Peter reminds him of his threefold denial. But his abandoning l of Jesus at the time of greatest trial has not led the Lord to abandon him. But his ministry as the shepherd of the flock, and as a witness to the resurrection, must begin with an honest acknowledgment of what has gone before.

It is in this context of intimacy and care that Jesus gently brings Peter to confront his sin, the pattern of his questioning echoing that of Peter’s denial. Peter’s unfaithfulness at the time of trial has not cancelled out Jesus’s choice of him — both to “fish for people” and to be the “rock” on which the Church is built. Jesus recognizes the great personal and social skills of Peter and gives him a tremendous endorsement. But this acceptance of Peter or as we might put it today , the tolerance of past, also carries with it a righteous judgement on his behavior. “There is a limit to what can be accepted or tolerated, even by flawed human beings, let alone God. Somethings have to be made right, justified, rectified. “The human race is redeemed not by acceptance, but by death and resurrection. This is the fullness of the message of Easter.” (Rutledge p 594)

Jesus’s calling of Paul, recounted in our epistle, involves a more abrupt and confrontational call to repentance. Travelling to Damascus to continue his persecution of the Early Church, he is confronted by Christ in a vision with the words “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” As Beverly Roberts Gaventa observes, “The verb ‘persecute’ (*dioko*) seldom occurs in Luke-Acts apart from its connection with Saul. Saul is, for Luke, the one who deserves the title ‘Persecutor’” (*Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Acts*).

Saul must face the crushing realization that the very acts that he understood to be ones of faithfulness to God were, in fact, persecuting his faithful servants — and, in them, persecuting Christ himself. Here, again, we see the gentleness of Christ; for, having confronted Saul with his sin, he commands the disciple Ananias to welcome and take care of him.

Ananias is understandably wary. As he points out, it is not only that Saul’s reputation goes before him, but, more specifically, “he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” But God reveals that Saul is to be “an instrument whom I have chosen” to make the gospel known to the Gentiles. Ananias therefore not only welcomes him, but lays hands on him, curing him of his temporary blindness and filling him with the Holy Spirit.

The parallels between the calling of Peter and Paul are striking. It is necessary for both men to realise that they cannot go on as they were. There must be a recognition of their failures and a willingness to change. In the old days we preachers used to call this repentance. For those of us who seek to follow Christ, we need to see our presence in this community this morning, is not because we chose to come here. It is due to God taking the initiative to draw us near to himself and it is his love that makes it possible for that darkness which dwells within the hearts of each of us to be confronted, forgiven and driven away by his light. This does not obliterate our own nature. As in the case of Peter and Paul we are made alive to what we were born to be.

Peter’s impetuosity and Paul’s violent zeal need ed to be tempered. But when these distinctive characteristics are thus disciplined, they enable both disciples to bear courageous witness even unto death. Dying to pride, they shine with a greater radiance. They are now filled with the power and the life of the risen Christ — and it is precisely through that process that they grow into the unique human beings who God created them to be. As Paul put it “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”