

Meeting God on the road

1st May 2022

By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

I was born into the church, went to Sunday school and bible class, aulavou our Samoan young adult's group, my whole life was church almost literally 7 days a week. I remember dad being session clerk of the church for as long as I could remember, and he was also a lay preacher. I have two brief cases of all the sermons he had ever written, his English was basic but enough to write a sermon and preach when he was needed. I think me going into the ministry was a fulfilment of his passion and hopes that were never realised. Every evening he would go and open up the church for the various groups using the building, the choir, the session, the Sunday school. Most Saturdays he would be out the back burning rubbish in the days when you were allowed to do so. We lived, breathed church that was home and social life. Going to Knox in 1986 even though I was training for the ministry was a bit of a break for me because no one was monitoring whether I got up in time to go to church on Sunday mornings, I was a free agent it was freeing and liberating.

As a teenager I was involved in the Charismatic renewal experience and went to the Jesus Crusades at Alexandra Race Course. My dad wasn't too please about it, later on when I went to the Assembly of God church on Tuesday nights he said, you have my blessing to go to AOG on Tuesday nights but you must come to our church every Sunday. At AOG I would see people get up and share their testimonies and I used to think, I don't have a testimony I do not know any other life but one in which God has always been present. I didn't know I was brought up on the

Emmaus road growing up with the stories of Jesus and the prophets. I couldn't relate to the Damascus road experience because God didn't need to stop me and blind me in order for me to become converted.

In 1999 I had the privilege of hosting one of the world's renowned theologian Dr. Kosuke Koyama he was the author of Water Buffalo theology which was one of the earliest contextual theological explorations. He was Japanese and I remember him telling me of the devastation of the bomb that hit his home city Hiroshima, how he and other children would scavenge through rubbish looking for food to stay alive. He calls conversion "Unexpected stops and new beginnings". These bring about moments of truth. Koyama describes the events at the end of the Second World War, when Japan was stopped by the declaration that they had been defeated. Saul too is so stopped, by a Jesus who introduces himself as the one whom Saul has been persecuting.

The word "persecuted" says Koyama hints of a relationship between love and suffering. If one loves one may suffer. The more one loves others, the greater may be one's suffering for them.

With humans as with our pets and animals all our relationships carry with the fear or loss or death, of detachment or separation, divorce. In love there is much suffering. But God in these stories of conversion comes to us as one who is open to be wounded. The word vulnerable comes from the Latin word *vulnus*, wound). God is love and love is vulnerable. The more profound our love, the greater its capacity to be persecuted, to suffer.

In Saul's eagerness to be a champion **for** God, Saul heads off down a road that literally blinds him to what God is doing. Saul's vision is narrowed by his focus on getting other people to do things (i.e., live out their faith) in the way Saul thought they should.

What Saul experiences on the way to Damascus is absolutely shocking for him. He thought he was doing what God wanted. Saul thought he was defending God and God's ways and here is God asking Saul why he is persecuting the One Saul claims to love... God. "Me? Persecuting You?!" You can almost hear the horror in Saul's voice.

The conversion of Saul is one of the world's most well-known stories of religious conversion, Luke in his Acts of the Apostles describes Jesus' calling of Saul on the road to Damascus. What happened to Saul that day was the central and transforming moment of his life. While all Christians encounter the call of Jesus in our own ways, Paul's story remains typical of the call to faith and meaning of conversion to Jesus Christ.

When I had the opportunity to sit on the National Assessment Committee for the Presbyterian Church a few years ago, I was able to read the many call experiences that students shared in their desire to candidate for the ministry. There were some that were dramatic like Saul in that after years of denial and running away from religion, they were suddenly converted to faith after a traumatic experience. Others felt called to pursue a call that had been quietly prompting them throughout their Christian lives.

I always like to use the images of the two roads to describe the different call experiences that people encounter. The Damascus Road and the Emmaus road, one is a sudden confrontation and the other one of growing up with the stories of the prophets and of Moses and walking with Christ

but not recognising for oneself the burning in ones heart at that particular moment. It often is some time before one realises the presence of Christ and a decision is to discern God's call is then actioned.

Several important theological themes are present in this story of God's revelation and Paul's response in faith. First, Paul is not called conceptually, that is, by teachings and doctrines, or religious images, but by the person of Jesus himself. Paul is not called to leave Judaism and become a follower of the Way, but rather to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus. In making his decision, Paul recognises that Jesus, the Crucified, is now alive and is addressing him person-to-person.

Beverly Gaventa in her book *From Darkness to Light*, says that conversion has 3 constant features (1) Conversion is always initiated by God. (2) It has to do with individuals but incorporates those individuals into the larger community. (3) Conversion is not an end in itself but, in Luke's stories it is a beginning.

The contents of the conversion experience include: (1) a crisis, turning point or emergency that demands decision; (2) a sense of seeing some new thing and an emotional response associated with it; (3) a decision, the act of cutting off of other possibilities; (4) acquiring knowledge (Paul Tillich insisted that healing and revelation always go together); (5) some kind of surrender of a previous way of being (6) a re-evaluation of the relationship to one's past or an aspect of that past; and (7) some kind of vocation to proclaim the reality of what has happened in the conversion process.

The consequences of the kind of change that conversion describes are (1) a kind of joy, peace and harmony that may have a variety of expressions (2) a sense of wholeness or integration in contrast to the previous demoralisation (3) the reinterpretation of oneself, the events of life and ones relationships from the vantage point of ones new perspective; (4) behaviour change or, in religious terminology, “the fruits of faith.” Or as C.S. Lewis put it, “Fine feelings, new insights, great interest in religion mean nothing unless they make our actual behaviour better...”

Change for us, our overcoming demoralisation, or our conversion may indeed be different from the pendulum swing in Paul and many others. It may leave us with a change growing naturally out of our previous lifestyle. It may involve transformation in which the past is integrated into the new for our selves. Whatever the change, it must make a difference in the way we live our lives. Change is possible.

When we love we become vulnerable and open ourselves up to be wounded. That is what God’s grace and mercy is all about. The Christian faith requires us to become the Christ in the world to shy away from comfortable compassion and to allow ourselves to experience the vulnerability of the cross, the vulnerability that love and attachment offers.

What do our encounters with God’s abundant grace and mercy leave us empowered to do and to be? How are we transformed to share in Christ’s work?

Today's story of encounter is transformational: it brings healing, new beginnings, and empowerment to serve God's purposes in the world in bold new ways.

There are all sorts of uncomfortable questions in relation to this passage around how we, as Christians, treat those of our fellow Christians, who think differently from us. Are we so intent on pursuing our own interpretation of the Christian life that we are 'blinded' to other possibilities of what God is doing?

Few of us are likely to have spiritual experiences as dramatic and vivid. How can we stay open and expectant? So, what road did you walk down when you encountered God on the road?