

Amazing grace
Bible reading: Acts 9.19-43

'By the grace of God, I am what I am.' 1 Corinthians 15.10

Paul, with all his faults, was destined to become one of the seminal figures in the history of the church: passionate, courageous, controversial, his conviction that the story of Jesus was good news *for everyone* changed the history of Christianity. The book of Acts is essentially the story of that vision, and how it gradually dawned on Peter and Paul and the Jerusalem church that Jesus actually meant what he said on the Mount of Olives: *You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (1.8).

But before you can change the world, you have to allow God to change you — and that's not as easy as it sounds. Paul was always conscious that his becoming an apostle, an emissary of the good news, was the result of the most amazing trust and generosity on God's part: *For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God* (1 Corinthians 15.8-10; cf. Galatians 1.13-17, Philippians 3.6). He can talk about God's amazing grace because he has experienced it at first hand.

And one of the ways God's amazing grace reaches out to us is through our ordinary, everyday interactions with ordinary, everyday people — people who reach out a hand of fellowship just when we need it. Not just great leaders, but ordinary people trying to follow Jesus in their daily lives. There are three of them in this chapter: Ananias, Barnabas, and Tabitha — everyday disciples who change the world by making a difference in their little bit of it.

Ananias always amazes me (vv.10-19). He can't believe it when he's asked to go and lay hands on Saul (v.12). No, Lord, you've got that wrong, he says — honestly, you don't want to have anything to do with that guy (vv.13-14). But he goes anyway — and his first words say everything Saul needs to hear. *Brother Saul*, (v.17) — no grudging welcome for the black sheep, no "I hope you're sorry," or "I'll be keeping my eye on you". Just a hand held out in welcome and healing. That's amazing grace in action.

Then there's **Barnabas** (vv.26-30) — one of my favourite characters in Acts. We met him in ch.4: the apostles had given him the nickname 'Mr Encouragement' (4.36), and here we can see why. Saul is back in Jerusalem, putting everybody's back up — including the church. He's a very raw and unfledged convert, arguing vociferously with his former friends and treated with suspicion by his new brothers. Maybe they thought his zeal was doing more harm than good. In this precarious state, Barnabas plays a crucial role as mentor and protector, the 'godfather' who welcomes Saul, introduces him to the apostles, believes in him and tells his story — and sends him away for a period out of the limelight. We'll meet Saul (and Barnabas) again in ch.11. But for now he has to spend time 'in the wilderness', learning in God's good time what it means to live in God's amazing grace.

And then there's **Tabitha**, aka **Dorcas** (vv.36-43). She's part of Peter's story, not Saul's, but she also plays an unexpected role in the story of God's amazing grace. Her name means 'gazelle,' and she's a woman disciple (Luke makes up a special word to make it clear that women can be disciples too). She's good with her hands, a seamstress, good at making baby clothes — and look what an impression she's made in her neighbourhood! She's one of the reasons Peter finds himself down by the seaside, in the port of Joppa, just in the right time and place for the next bit of amazing grace to unfold.

God bless, Loveday

*Lord, you have searched me and known me:
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You discern my thoughts from afar. ...
I will thank you because I am wonderfully made:
Your works are wonderful and I know it well. ..*

Say a prayer of thanks for God's amazing grace in making you who you are — and for all the unsung heroes who are the channels of that grace in our lives and in the world.