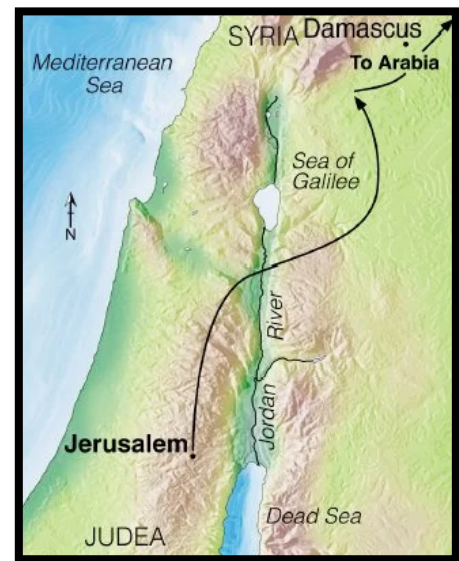


An Unexpected Journey

Paul

Acts 9:1-20

Paul knew he was going on a journey. He thought this journey would be from Jerusalem to Damascus. In his time, this was a trip of a bit over 200km, although today it would be almost doubled due to the conflict and border closures in place. He thought this journey would take him to one of the major Ex patriot centres of Judaism, where among the many synagogues and through the large Jewish community he would find those heretics that preached that this crucified man was the Messiah.



Paul was a passionate man, with all that confidence of youth that he had it right. I wonder if that is why his parents sent him, as a teenager, to study with Gamaliel, who preached tolerance towards this new movement, noting – as we heard in last week's reflection - that if it came from humans it would eventually disperse, but if from God then they should not fight against it. Paul absolutely knew where he was going and why. There was not a shadow of doubt in his mind.

But this was not the journey on which he was taken.

On the road to Damascus, Paul took a different journey. It was a journey from being self-confident and independent to a child-like dependence and relying on other people. The worst part of that journey was this was not only dependence on others who were “like him” and faithful members of the Jewish community – at least faithful in the way that he understood. He experienced support and grace from a member of the community that he was actively persecuting.

Fair play to Paul. It is not easy to admit when we make mistakes and even harder to let an experience such as this change us as radically as it did him. The radical young Pharisee might have heard his teacher speaking about grace and tolerance, but it was not until he experienced it for himself that he could know what it actually meant... and in that was his real journey.

So, Paul started another journey. Instead of staying in Damascus, he went east to Arabia for three years before meeting with Peter in Jerusalem and being launched onto the missionary journeys to preach the Gospel that he had once tried to suppress.

Peter

John 21:1-19

Peter thought he was not going anywhere. He had been there, done that, and been hurt in some of the worst ways possible as his friend and teacher had been arrested, tortured, and killed. To make matters worse, Peter, who thought he would stand beside Jesus no matter what, had denied even knowing him. It was all



too hard and painful to bear. Sure, there had been some experience of Resurrection after that fateful day, but now Peter was back in his home. Back to where it all started, doing what he knew best – fishing. Not that he was doing very well this night, the raw emotion of the last few years meant he could not even ply his trade with any level of skill. Peter was back where he started and, as far as he was concerned, was not going anywhere again.

It was a rather tactless question shouted to him from the beach, almost like rubbing in his incompetence at whatever he turned his hands towards: "have you no fish?" Is it that obvious? Just yell it a bit louder, so everyone knows that Peter, the failed fisherman and disciple does not have the skill to do *anything*.

Do it again, but differently! The instructions come back from the shore. They had been doing what they always had done, because... well... tradition? Now they were told to do it differently and the response was almost instant – a full to overflowing net of fish. It was enough for the disciples to recognise the Resurrection experience again and impulsive Peter forgets about good manners, and leaps over the side of the boat to get into the shore faster.

Peter is led on this journey by the three-fold question to match his three-fold denial and in that experience of grace finds what he needs to pick up the journey again and to follow Jesus.

Tradition says that Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome during Nero's persecution. The crucifixion of Peter is a very early tradition – and we hear the suggestion of it in today's reading, so the tradition is well known by the start of the second century – which means it is probably more than tradition, although the when and where may not be entirely accurate.

Peter's journey ends, not as an obscure fisherman struggling to make a living in Galilee. It ends as the leader of the primitive church, and a leader who has the strength to be killed in the most brutal way possible because of his beliefs. It was a journey he never thought he would make.

Us, here today

We are also on a journey. We might be like Peter and not know it yet. We might be like Paul and think we are going in one direction, but have that direction radically changed. We may be making this journey as individuals or as a community. The journey is different for each of us and it can be just as unexpected as it was for Peter and Paul.

Yet, despite the unexpected nature of their journeys, both Peter and Paul had been prepared for them. They may not have recognised it at the time, but they had both been prepared for this: Peter to carry on the memory of the risen Christ, and Paul to deepen the theological understanding in the Jewish tradition.

And when we also encounter these unexpected journeys, can we also hear God's call? Will you trust that, despite what has happened before, you have what is needed to respond to Jesus' invitation: follow me?

