

## 502 A Life in Three Acts

In last week's Reflection we considered the modern phenomenon of "wokery", involving a disparate range of groups and individuals who share one key quality – that of anger. Flowing from that anger come their various tactics and activities, based on their making as much angry noise as possible for as long as possible.

In "Act One" of his life, Saul of Tarsus knew all about anger too. In Acts Chapter 26 the Holy Spirit has given us, through Luke and the by-then-Paul, a full account of his upbringing and outlook, which he recounted before Festus, King Herod Agrippa and Bernice in Caesarea. Saul was well-known among the Jews in Jerusalem as being a member of "the most straitest sect of our religion ... I lived a Pharisee" (from 26.5, KJV). "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (v.9).

Sure enough, with the authority of the chief priests, Saul set about rounding up "the saints", putting them in prison, and assenting to their deaths – "I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled [them] to blaspheme: and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted [them] even unto strange cities" (from vv.10-11).

Of course throughout all this Saul was very devout, as the Pharisees understood devotion; he was certain that he was in the right, and that Jesus' followers were most definitely in the wrong. We note from this that devotion to a cause tells us nothing about the truth or falsehood of that cause. Today's devoted followers of wokery for instance, or of any of the other "Faiths" on offer today, illustrate the point.

But then, as a complete surprise, Saul was confronted with "Act Two" of his life. This angry, self-righteous man, with his companions, suddenly "were all fallen to the earth" in response to "a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun" (from 26.13-14a). The voice of the risen Jesus addressed him - "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (from 26.14 & 9.5b, an image from ploughing, where the ox-herd would direct his oxen from behind the plough with a long goad, and if and when they resisted that goad, they got hurt!).

Jesus then commissioned Saul with a clear brief: among the Gentiles, he was to open their eyes, turn them from darkness to light and from the power (authority) of Satan unto God, that they might receive

“forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me (Jesus)” (from 26.18). “Scene Two” from this “Act Two” then involved the visit of Ananias, through whom Jesus restored “Brother Saul’s” sight, filled him with the Holy Ghost and oversaw his baptism (Acts 9.10-18).

“Act Three” began “straightway”! (Acts 9.20a) – Saul “preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God”, and despite the surprise of his hearers at his drastic switch of sides – was it a trick? - he “increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ” (from 9.20-22). There then follow many more scenes in this Act Three of Paul’s life, as made known to us in Acts Chapters 13–28 and in his various Epistles. Truly Jesus’ words to Saul voiced by Ananias – “I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” - proved to be all too true during the years of Paul’s extraordinary ministry that followed. Finally Paul suffered martyrdom for Christ, but he passed over to His Lord having “fought the good fight, having finished his course, and having kept the faith”, as he eagerly waited to receive his “crown of righteousness” (from II Timothy 4.6-8).

By God’s grace, all of us “in Christ”, that is, in “Act Three” of our lives, follow in Paul’s footsteps, no doubt on a smaller stage but with much the same brief. For, as opportunity arises, we too are to open eyes, to turn God-estranged sinners from darkness to light, from Satan’s power to God’s kingdom, in which is granted, through simple faith in Christ, forgiveness of sins and an eternal inheritance. The many false Faiths surrounding us today, from Atheism through to Zoroastrianism, will all pass away, and every member of those Faiths will bow the knee before Jesus, and confess that He is indeed the Lord, “to the glory of God the Father” (from Philippians 2.9-11).

We take courage! In Christ the path will surely be tough at times, but as Saul, later Paul, was first warned and then repeatedly experienced, the Christ-Path is always the right path, the path of the One who, uniquely, is “the way, the truth and the life”, and the only means of access to God the Father” (John 14.6).

It was foolish then, and is still foolish now, for anyone to “kick against the pricks”, pricks which are caused by the gracious prodding of the goad of the Lord Jesus Christ.