

As Saul neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. Acts 9.3.

Well, what did you make of Patrick Sookhdeo last Sunday as he told us of Christians abroad suffering for their faith, and the rise of Islam here in our own country? Pretty scary stuff, wasn't it? A lot of people just shut their ears to all this, because it is 'an inconvenient truth'.

Do you believe in coincidences, because I don't? Look what our next passage in *Acts* happens to be? It's ch9, on p1102, and, guess what, it's about Christians being persecuted 2,000 years ago, by one of the cruellest, most bigoted Pharisees called Saul of Tarsus. You think you Christians today are a discarded minority in our secular society. Well, 2,000 years ago those first Christians were a tiny minority living under a pagan Roman empire with the continual hostility of the Jews, led by fanatics like Saul of Tarsus. We've already read in *Acts* 7 how Saul voted in favour of stoning Stephen to death for following Jesus. Now this same Saul is on yet another pogrom against Christians in Damascus, vv1-2...

Those poor Christians didn't stand a chance against the combined forces of the Roman state and the Jewish religious establishment. But then something out of the blue happened, something which no-one could have predicted, something utterly incredible. We read here one of the most dramatic accounts in the Bible, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to persecute Christians in Damascus, vv3-9...

We know this story so well that possibly we have lost its impact. As I have said before, this is the equivalent of Osama bin Laden becoming a Christian. Imagine! The fiercest enemy of

the Christians became their greatest champion. Don't let familiarity of this account dull its meaning for you.

And what *is* its meaning? In this 9th chapter of *Acts*, what is God's Word for you today? It is very simple, and it is this: that God is on the throne. He's in charge. When things were most dangerous and fearsome for those believers in Damascus; when they didn't stand a chance and had no cards in their hands, God did an amazing thing: he converted their greatest enemy. He's in charge; he's on the throne. You need to *know* that, in your personal lives, and our national life.

Everything that Patrick Sookhdeo said last Sunday was right. Christians abroad *are* being hammered. The atheist Anthony Browne, former foreign correspondent of *The Times*, wrote in the *Spectator* in 2005 to say that 300 *million* Christians are being persecuted, and our media never report it. Why not? Remember, this is an *atheist* making this point!

Patrick is also right that Muslims are making huge and dangerous incursions into the fabric of our society. They can do this because most of our people don't believe anything, and so Muslims can fill the spiritual vacuum. After last Sunday's service, I know that many of you were quite bewildered. You asked, 'Yes, but what can I do?'

In the light of *Acts* 9 I want now very briefly to respond to that. Certainly we should keep saying our prayers, and get back into God's Word which strengthens our belief. As Patrick also said, we need to start evangelising and telling people about Jesus, not just as nice teacher, but as Saviour and Lord. Ah, Jesus as *Lord*! What does 'Lord' mean? It means boss,

the one in charge, the one in control. And that's precisely what happened here is *Acts 9*. You ask, 'Yes, but what can we do?' But *Acts 9* tells us that the Christians of Damascus did nothing. It was what the living Lord *Jesus* did. *He* was the one who appeared to Saul on the Damascus road and challenged him, 'Saul, Saul, wherefore persecutest thou me?'

Certainly the Christians did their bit *after* Saul's life-changing encounter with Christ. Ananias did his bit. We know nothing of Judas, except that he had the right house in the right place at the right time, in Straight St, Damascus. It's amazing that Straight St is still there, vv10-19a... But essentially this was *God's* work, not man's. He is on the throne. Do you believe that? Do you live your life, not fatalistically, but knowing that *nothing* happens, not even a sparrow falling to the ground without God's knowing? Living with that knowledge is the secret of confident living.

Yes, there's loads wrong with our society. A lot of it is very scary indeed. But so it was for those Christians in Damascus, but God did an incredible thing when he called Saul.

Can I give you a little history lesson? Tom Holland is a writer of popular history, of Greece and Rome, and now of what we call the 'Dark Ages'. In the 9th and the 10th centuries Christians living in the west were scared. There was perpetual warfare, violence, famine. Life was cheap. Popes were always fighting with kings, and there wasn't much spiritual help from *that* quarter. From the north the people were living in fear of pagan Vikings attacking them, and in the south was the constant presence of, guess what, *Muslims*. Muhammad had died

in 632, and by 711 Muslims had conquered nearly the whole of Spain. They were only stopped at a huge battle fought right in the heart of France, at Tours in 732. And Christians everywhere were scared to death of the coming of the year 1,000. They understood from the Bible that this was the year when the Antichrist would come, and 'they were all *doomed!*'

Well, the year 1,000 came and went. The Antichrist didn't come. In fact a great Christian civilisation was born in Europe, the flowering of the High Middle Ages. What I am saying is that God is on the throne, and he has his plans, his plans for Saul, his plans for beleaguered, scared Europe.

Don't get me wrong. I think this credit crunch is serious. We are being punished for our greed. Islam is a real challenge to our godless society. The general falling apart of our once Christian society is extremely frightening, but God is still on the throne. He knows exactly what he is doing.

I believe he is bringing us as a nation to the point of repentance. In so many ways God is pouring the cold water of reality all over us; we've been kidding ourselves too long. He is also shaking the *Church* from its complacency. But he is most certainly on the throne, just as when he did the impossible by changing Saul's life. Saul had his plans that day, but God had *his* plans that day also, and he prevailed, because Jesus is Lord. Interesting things are happening in our godless society. It has its plans, but God has *his* plans too, and he will prevail. I believe we are on the brink of revival.

What can you do? Get into *God's* plan. Get back to his Word, back to Jesus as Lord, and join him round this Table.