**May 1 2022 The Example of Ananias Acts 9:1-20**

The stories of our faith are quite amazing. They certainly do not feature predictable characters, with impressive pedigrees, operating out of the skills they have acquired through hard work and study.

The call of God, in so many instances, seems to come to the most unlikely of people. People who respond by stating they are too young, inarticulate, scared and flawed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It seems that the call of God often comes to those least likely to succeed. Those who most people would overlook, or immediately reject. It sometimes makes me wonder if the ways in which we train people to be Ministers in the church frustrate or amuse God.

In the story we read today we see the call of God coming to two people. We often focus on the call of God to Saul, later to be re-named Paul. He looms large in the pages of Scripture and the life of the early church. A large amount of the New Testament writings relate to him, or are attributed to him.

However, the call of God also came to Ananias in this story, and it is the call to him that I would primarily like to explore today.

Ananias does not receive a high profile in Scripture. In fact, when I consulted some reference books, I found it very difficult to find very much acknowledgement of him at all. In fact, one Bible Dictionary mentioned the Ananias we encounter earlier in the book of Acts who sought to deceive the early church regarding a gift of money that he gave and was immediately struck down and died. However, there was no mention of this Ananias.

During the week Andrew Hope commented to me that he thought Ananias was one of the bravest members of the early Christian church. The comment stuck with me, he really is amazingly brave.

Saul however was a powerful man given authority over others. He has been described as “a hard-line, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super-orthodox Pharisaic Jew.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He is a passionate follower of God seeking to protect other followers of God from straying into error.

The high priest had given instructions to this young hot head to search out people in this far off town, capture and subdue them and bring them back to the High Priest for examination and judgement.

However, His life is turned upside down in this story as he encounters Jesus through a vision on the road to Damascus.

For Saul there will not only be the turnaround of moving from opposing to believing in Jesus, but also of being an ardent Israelite meticulous about preserving the faith of Israel from all ‘contamination’ by these new followers of Jesus, to one who will spearhead the full acceptance of Gentiles into the faith he will now profess. This one who knew the law so intently will be the one to reach out to those who know nothing about the law, and he will seek to dismantle the interpretation of the law which he has been passionately promoting and enforcing.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Saul’s encounter with Jesus provokes the entry of Ananias into this story. Later in the book of Acts Ananias is described as “a devout man well spoken of according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Just as Saul needed a personal revelation of Jesus in order to believe, Ananias also needed revelation to convince him that God could work through someone who had been as cruel as Saul had been towards the early followers of Jesus.

However, Ananias sets before us a wonderful example of a wholeheartedly committed follower of Jesus. We know nothing of Ananias’s background, nor do we ever encounter him in any other context than this story. When Ananias was confronted by God through a vision, his immediate response was to indicate his openness and availability to God. Like the prophets of old he says, “Here I am Lord”.

His availability leads to him receiving some very specific instructions from God regarding who he is being called to see and where to find him. Clearly Ananias was ready to listen to God, he carries on a dialogue with God that sound like a relaxed, respectful conversation with a friend. We can imagine that communication with God in prayer was a familiar practice in his life. The clarity of the instructions he receives reinforces that God was speaking to him, he now had the choice regarding how he responded.

Ananias was well informed, he knew about Saul, what he had been doing in other places, why he had come to Damascus, and on whose authority he was acting.

Ananias’s relationship with God is close enough that he was able to honestly present his questions and doubts to God. He describes his understandings about Saul, yet he also remains open to how God may respond. He engages in a conversation with God whereby he can express that he is worried, hesitant, and nervous. However, he is also very willing to obey God, even though the situation seemed ridiculously dangerous.

Ananias indeed obeyed, he went and did what God had told him to do, even greeting Saul as a brother. From the outset these early followers of Jesus regarded one another as family, in a culture that put a much higher emphasis on family than our culture.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It’s worth stopping here to be sure we are really taking this in. he is confronting the man he feared, whom he rightly believed had come here to persecute followers of Jesus, and yet he is now able to greet him as a brother.

It’s also worth noting what Saul has been doing, he has been fasting and praying. He was a devout Pharisee prayer and fasting would have been common practices to Saul, yet the fact that he was praying and fasting highlights Saul’s ongoing readiness and openness to God and the ongoing revelation that God may bring to him.

Ananias had been given insight by God regarding the future ministry of Saul. In the version of this story in Acts 22, Ananias shares this insight with Saul. He says, *“ ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; 15for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Ananias not only speaks with Saul he also acts and provokes Saul to action. Ananias acts by praying for Saul, praying for his healing, the healing of his sight, and praying that he be filled with the Holy Spirit.

He provokes Saul to action and Saul responds. He is baptised thereby signifying the life changing experience he has had and the reality that he now embarks on a very different path in life as a follower of Jesus. Saul had a new sense of direction and commission, and demonstrated a new sense of power, not power exerted over people, but power to bless all with the good news of Jesus. Equipped by the Holy Spirit Saul immediately goes on to share in the synagogues, his new found understanding that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah. This provoked Saul’s first experience of his new found faith putting his life at risk. He also experiences the acceptance of the wider early Christian community as they help him to escape unharmed.

Ananias challenges us to consider our own openness to God, our expectation that God may be trying to speak to us.

He challenges us to take courage from God in those times when we may be called to become involved in a situation that may be intimidating.

Ananias reminds us that we can and should be honest with God, acknowledging our fears and hesitations can pave the way to gain a greater understanding of what God is doing and how we can be involved.

He also reminds us that God calls us to pray for one another and that our support of one another helps us all to grow.

Saul reminds us of the limitless grace of God that reaches out to us, and of the reality that God, not one’s past history, determines one’s worth and potential.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. See Judges 6:15; Exodus 4:10-12; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 1:6-7; 2 Timothy 1:6-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Chapters 1-12,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Chapters 1-12,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 22:12 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. N. T. Wright, *Paul: A biography,* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2018) 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Acts 22:14-15 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Matt Skinner accessed through https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching-series/preaching-acts-in-easter-year-c [↑](#footnote-ref-7)