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**IN JESUS CHRIST WE HAVE A MERCIFUL LORD WHO TRANSFORMS HIS ENEMIES INTO FRIENDS****Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, 2019****Acts 9:1-22**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the First Reading from before, Acts 9:1-22: <sup>1</sup> **Saul was still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, in order that, if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. <sup>3</sup> On his journey, as he was coming near Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?”**

<sup>5</sup> **Saul asked, “Who are You, Lord?”**

He said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> However, get up, go into the city! You will be told what you must do.”

<sup>7</sup> **The men who were travelling with Saul were standing speechless. They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground. However, when he opened his eyes, he could not see anything. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he could not see, and did not eat or drink.**

<sup>10</sup> **There was a certain disciple at Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision: “Ananias!”**

He answered, “Yes, Lord, here I am.”

<sup>11</sup> **The Lord told him, “Get up, go to the street called ‘Straight,’ and in the home of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus by the name of Saul! For, you must know, he is praying. <sup>12</sup> He has also seen in a vision that a man by the name of Ananias has come in and laid his hands on him, that he may get his sight back.”**

<sup>13</sup> **Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much wrong this man has done to Your holy people in Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name.”**

<sup>15</sup> **However, the Lord told Ananias, “Go! For this man is My chosen instrument, to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I shall show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name.”**

<sup>17</sup> **Ananias went, and arrived at the house. He laid his hands on Saul, and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me, even Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, so that you may get your sight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

<sup>18</sup> **Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised.**

<sup>19</sup> **Then he had something to eat and regained his strength.**

**Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and asked, “Is he not the man who made havoc among those in Jerusalem who were calling on this name, and has he not come here for this purpose, to take them as prisoners to the high priests?”**

<sup>22</sup> **However, Saul became stronger and stronger, and was causing consternation in the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify s through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

If some reason or another you had to select someone to serve as a character witness, you would hardly choose someone who did not like you! Again, if you had something that was very precious to you, and you needed someone to care for it, you would hardly choose someone who had repeatedly gone out of his way to work

against your interests. To do so would be to defy all human reason, yet that is *exactly* what we find our Lord doing today. Christ selects Saul, the persecutor of Christians, to be His chosen apostle to carry the Gospel of Christ to the nations.

Jesus had ascended to heaven, and the Holy Spirit had come on the Day of Pentecost. Marvelous things were happening through the apostles to the consternation of the Jewish leaders.

The apostles were boldly preaching the Word of God, and healing people of diseases. More and more were being added to God's flock, and, as the number of disciples increased, others were appointed to serve in the capacity of deacons, men who would direct the practical affairs of the Church. One such deacon was Stephen.

Being full of God's grace and power, Stephen too had been performing great wonders and signs among the people. Again, this caused much opposition from the synagogue, and we know what this led to. After giving his speech on how the Jews were just like their fathers who always resisted the Holy Spirit, the people had heard enough. Without pronouncing sentence, they took Stephen out to kill him. *Yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at Stephen, <sup>58</sup>dragged him out of the city and began to stone him,* (Acts 7:57-58). It was illegal to carry out the death penalty without permission of the Roman governor, but that did not seem to matter when a mob action resulted in murder. Then, we are introduced to Saul. Luke says that "*The witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul,*" (Acts 7:58b).

A great persecution then broke out against the Christian Church, and Saul did his best to destroy this movement. We are told that **he went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, in order that, if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners.** "The Way" was another designation for believers. It reminds us that Jesus is the Way to the Father<sup>1</sup> and that the Christian life is a special way of life. Saul was determined to destroy the church everywhere.

Jesus, though, had other ideas. <sup>3</sup> **On his journey, as (Paul) was coming near Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.**

On that road to Damascus, on his way to imprison Christians, Christ met Saul not to punish him, but to set him free. Saul had set out in malice, but Jesus met him in mercy.

Christ began by confronting Saul with his sin. The risen, glorified Jesus came to Saul. Saul **fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?"** In his blindness, <sup>5</sup> **Saul asked, "Who are You, Lord?"** The Lord answered **"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."**

Although Saul's physical sight was gone, he began at last to see things clearly. In persecuting the Church - the Body of Christ - he had been persecuting Christ Himself, and Christ, whom he persecuted, is Himself the Lord.

With that heartrending knowledge, Saul was sent by the Lord Jesus into Damascus where <sup>9</sup> **For three days he could not see, and did not eat or drink.** Saul had time to consider what he had done and to begin connecting the Scriptures he had *long known* with the One he *now knew* those Scriptures testified about. Then the Lord sent to Saul a faithful man named Ananias, one of the Damascus Christians Saul had been intending to arrest.

Ananias came to Saul, laid his hands on him, and baptised him into Christ Jesus. Through God's gift of healing, Saul's eyes were opened to see, and through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, Saul was brought out of the darkness into God's marvelous light.

Through Ananias, the Lord revealed His plans for Saul, saying to Ananias that **"this man is My chosen instrument, to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."**

Now that Saul had been brought into the light of Christ, he would serve as Christ's instrument to bring that light to the world. A Pharisee who had persecuted Jews for believing in Jesus would carry Jesus' name to Gentiles. He who had believed that salvation is in doing the works of the law would teach that salvation is by faith in Christ alone.

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:6

On the cross, Christ by His blood has “*purchased people to be God’s own out of every **tribe, language, people, and nation,***” (Rev 5:9). So after spending **some days with the disciples at Damascus**, Saul **began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God**, and in His gracious wisdom, our Lord chose to send that message out to sinners *through* sinners. After all, who better than *the forgiven* to share the good news of *forgiveness*? Who better than a man like Saul, who could describe himself as the chief of sinners<sup>2</sup> to speak the comfort that Christ is the friend of sinners?

So, beginning from Damascus, Christ sent His Gospel through Saul - also known as Paul - to places like Arabia, Asia Minor, and Europe. There, Saul carried Christ’s name before Gentiles and Jews, bondservants and businesswomen, gaol keepers and kings.

Along the way, Saul suffered greatly for the name of Christ - much like others had once suffered for Christ at Saul’s own hand, but through that name of Christ that he proclaimed, countless souls found light, life, and peace in Christ - just as Saul did.

Ever since then, Christ has continued to send out His Gospel through one forgiven sinner to another - and today, He sends it to *you*, for this message is just as important for us as it was for Saul.

Now, while we may not have participated in the organised persecution of Christians as Saul did, yet we are every bit as dependent on God’s saving grace as Saul was. Each one of us comes into this life with a fallen, sinful nature that looks in toward itself rather than up to the Lord - a heart that by nature does not humble itself before the Lord or put His will above our own. As Paul once put it, we by nature have a mind that “*is hostile to God*” and “*does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot,*” (Rom 8:7). In short, we are by nature enemies of God. Yet, just as Christ was not content to let Saul continue on his dead-end road, our Lord did not want to see any of us lost. So, as he did for Saul, He has come to us.

As He did for Saul, Christ has come to us personally to give the new life purchased for us on the cross and previewed for us in His resurrection. By water and the Word, in Holy Baptism He has shined His light into our heart. Having paid our ransom on the cross, He has personally unshackled our chains, and we are free.

As Christ cared for Saul throughout the highs and lows of his mission work, Christ also continues to come to us in His Word and at His Table - comforting us with His forgiveness, strengthening us in His grace, and giving us His peace. He comes and calls us “*friend,*” (John 15:15).

Though we have earned none of this, it is all ours as God’s free gift in Christ. For, as we have seen in Saul’s experience and see in what the Lord has done for us, in Jesus Christ we have a merciful Lord who transforms His enemies into friends.

That is the kind of God we have: A God who astounds us with His amazingly gracious choices. A God who chose His most tireless opponent to carry His name before the nations. A God who entrusted the treasure of His Gospel to a man who had once tried to eradicate the Gospel. A God who reaches out to people like Saul - and like you and me - who have lived as His enemies, and He chooses us to be His trusted friends.

For all this, may the name of Jesus Christ be praised forevermore, for He alone is worthy. To *Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing, honour, glory, and power for ever and ever!* (Rev. 5:13). Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You have sent Your Son into the world, not to be served, but to serve and to give His life to redeem all people. After He had offered His life as the one sacrifice for all sins for ever, You raised Him from the dead by Your glorious power. Give us a living faith in Him, so that we may possess the sure hope of eternal life through Him. We thank You for all Your kindness in our lives. Do not let us forget that every good gift comes from You.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 1:15

We thank You for taking away the darkness of our minds and spirits, and for revealing to us Your Word of truth in Jesus Christ. Pour out Your Spirit on us, that He may keep us spiritually alive through Your Word in our hearts. Give us deeper understanding of Your truth, and of Your great love for us.

We thank You for the fellowship of believers that we have in Your church. Protect your church from enemies without, and keep us all in the unity that the Spirit gives. Prevent disunity, party spirit, and discord from giving Satan a foothold among us. Keep us all in Christ Jesus by faith and joyful obedience, and in loyalty to Your infallible Word. Shower Your blessings upon Your Church everywhere, and give it success in all Your work.

Give us opportunities to tell the Gospel to others who need to hear it, and give us the wisdom and the courage to use them. Enable us to draw people into Your Word, through which Your Spirit works faith, and fill us with the message of Jesus' resurrection and the ability to tell it forth.

We thank You for giving us Christian homes. Surround every family with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, that love, peace, forgiveness, comfort, joy, and moral purity may fill our lives.

We thank You, Lord, for the blessings we enjoy in our rich land. Defend it, both within and without, from all who would harm it by sin, undermine it by strife and rebellion, or destroy it by war.

We thank You, O Father, for the gifts of our daily bread, for health and healing, education and social joys, friends and companions, and all the beauties and wonders of Your creation. Give us weather that is appropriate for our needs. Alongside all the blessings that you give us daily and richly, give us, as well, joyful and thankful hearts, and the willingness to use what You give us to serve You.

We commend to Your gracious care those among us who are ill, lonely, or depressed. Comfort them with the good news of their redemption and the hope of life eternal through Jesus' sacrificial death and glorious resurrection.

Surround us with Your love, and finally receive us into perfect, unbroken fellowship with You and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Hear the prayers we bring You in His precious name. Amen.

### THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 9:1-22

<sup>1</sup> Saul was still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, in order that, if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. <sup>3</sup> On his journey, as he was coming near Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?"

<sup>5</sup> Saul asked, "Who are You, Lord?"

He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> However, get up, go into the city! You will be told what you must do."

<sup>7</sup> The men who were travelling with Saul were standing speechless. They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground. However, when he opened his eyes, he could not see anything. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he could not see, and did not eat or drink.

<sup>10</sup> There was a certain disciple at Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision: "Ananias!"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, here I am."

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<sup>13</sup> Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much wrong this man has done to Your holy people in Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name."

<sup>15</sup> However, the Lord told Ananias, "Go! For this man is My chosen instrument, to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I shall show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name."

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road as you were coming here, so that you may get your sight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>18</sup> Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised. <sup>19</sup> Then he had something to eat and regained his strength.

Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and asked, “Is he not the man who made havoc among those in Jerusalem who were calling on this name, and has he not come here for this purpose, to take them as prisoners to the high priests?”

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#### Revelation 5:1-14

<sup>1</sup> In the right hand of Him who was sitting on the throne I saw a scroll with writing on the inside and on the back, which had been sealed with seven seals.

<sup>2</sup> Then I saw a mighty angel, proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break the seals on it?”

<sup>3</sup> No one in heaven, on the earth, or under the earth could open the scroll or look at it. <sup>4</sup> I was weeping bitterly because no one had been found who was worthy to open the scroll or look at it. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders told me: “Stop weeping! Look! The Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has won the victory, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

<sup>6</sup> Then I saw, in the middle of the throne and of the four living creatures and in the middle of the elders, a Lamb standing, looking as though it had been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the Seven Spirits of God, who have been sent into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> Then He went and took the scroll out of the right hand of the One who was sitting on the throne. <sup>8</sup> When He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each held a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s holy people. <sup>9</sup> They sang a new song, with the words: “You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because You have been slain; and by Your blood You have purchased people to be God’s own out of every tribe, language, people, and nation. <sup>10</sup> You

have made them a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign on the earth.”

<sup>11</sup> Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders. Their number was ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands. <sup>12</sup> They were saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who has been slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing!”

<sup>13</sup> Then I heard every creature that is in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and on the sea, and all that are in them, saying: “To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing, honour, glory, and power for ever and ever!”

<sup>14</sup> The four living creatures were saying, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshipped.

#### John 21:1-19

<sup>1</sup> After this, Jesus showed Himself again to His disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how He showed Himself: <sup>2</sup> Simon Peter, Thomas, who was called “The Twin,” Nathanael, who was from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples of Jesus were together. <sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to the others, “I am going fishing.”

They told him, “We too are coming with you.”

They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. <sup>4</sup> When morning had already come, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Then Jesus asked them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?”

They answered Him, “No.”

<sup>6</sup> He told them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat! You will find some!”

So they cast the net, and they could not pull it in again, because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup> Then the disciple whom Jesus loved told Peter, “It is the Lord.”

So when Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he put on the outer garment that he had taken off, fastened it with his belt, and jumped into the sea. <sup>8</sup> The other disciples came in the small boat, towing the net full of fish. For they were not far from the shore, only about a hundred metres away. <sup>9</sup> Then, when they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals set there, with fish laid on it, and some bread.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus told them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught!”

<sup>11</sup> Then Simon Peter got into the boat and dragged the net ashore, full of one hundred and fifty-three large fish; and, although there were so many, the net had not been torn. <sup>12</sup> Jesus told them, “Come and have breakfast!”

None of the disciples dared to ask Him, “Who are You?”

They knew that it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them, and the fish as well.

<sup>14</sup> This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after He had been raised from the dead.

<sup>15</sup> So, when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?”

He said to Him, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.”

Jesus told him, “Feed My lambs!”

<sup>16</sup> Jesus asked him again, a second time, “Si-mon, son of John, do you love Me?”

He answered Him, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love you.”

Jesus told him, “Be a shepherd to My sheep!”

<sup>17</sup> Jesus asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

Peter was saddened because He had asked him the third time, “Do you love Me?”

He answered Him, “Lord, You know all things. You know that I love you.”

Jesus told him, “Feed My sheep! <sup>18</sup> Truly, truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to tie on your belt and walk where you wished. However, when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will tie on your belt, and carry you where you do not wish.”

<sup>19</sup> Jesus said this to signify by what kind of death Peter would glorify God. After He had said this, He told him, “Follow Me!”