

## **Sermon 25/01/2026 Matthew 19: 27-end**

### **Topsy Turvy**

Frighteningly I worked out this week that it is almost 50 years since I was sent to do basic Scout Leader training. Most of it is long forgotten and given the changes that have taken place in Scouting since then, it doesn't matter. When I was training the youngest members were 8 year old Cubs, still referred to as Wolf Cubs by some of my older colleagues. There are now not one but two younger sections with Squirrels from the age of four, and there are girls. But one thing that I was told that weekend is firmly embedded in my brain. The trainer drew a structure chart. It showed the Chief Scout at the bottom of the page and broadened through an array of Commissioners and District staff up to the top line. There, at the top of the chart, we found the Cubs, especially the trainer emphasised, the Cubs who only joined recently.

At the time I was also at college studying a variety of subjects including management, so I knew what a structure chart should look like, and this wasn't it. Surely we should find the Chief Executive Officer at the top and drop down the page to the people who had no say in how the organisation was run.

What sort of topsy turvy world was this?

Today's readings are all a bit topsy turvy. Saul who has pursued the members of the Christian church with great zeal in order to persecute them has emerged as Christ's greatest supporter. Matthew reports that the people who have eternal life will be those who have given much away. First will be last and last will be first.

When Paul Hinton came earlier in the month he preached about Epiphany moments - those times of sudden and deep understanding. Saul certainly had one of those on the road. Although he was kept waiting for three days without sight, food or drink until this came to fruition. For all the characters described in this account in Acts the event was as strange as it was unexpected.

Saul himself had set out for Damascus with the intention of capturing members of the early church and returning them to Jerusalem in chains. But what about his companions? They heard the voice Saul was talking to but saw no one. It must have appeared as though Saul was in a moment of madness and then blindness. When they led Saul into the city they must have been full of confusion as to what was going on. Wondering where it would lead. And we hear nothing more about either who they were or what they did next. Were they Saul's family, friends, some sort of posse from the temple guard? They may have immediately retraced their steps to Jerusalem or if not did Saul invite them also to be baptised.

In comparison we know so much more about Ananias and the quandary he faced. 'Go', says God in a vision, 'You will find Saul, he is expecting you and he is praying'. Ananias

knowing Saul by reputation, is uneasy. He questions why he is being sent knowing that it could lead to his imprisonment. But Jesus tells him to go as he has chosen Saul to spread the message of his love to the Gentiles. Ananias obeys. Would we do you think have the strength of faith to walk into certain trouble even in the knowledge that it was the right thing to do. Saul's sight is restored and he is baptised. In the event it is the unexpected that happens. Ananias is safe, Saul is baptised.

In his vision God tells Ananias that Saul is praying. One of the commentaries I read makes the distinction between saying prayers, presumably using set prayers by rote and without paying much attention to their meaning, and praying as part of a closer relationship with Jesus where the prayers have true meaning. Saul's prayers were of the latter kind. Both Saul and Ananias are asked in faith to do things which are hard, and dangerous.

The first disciples as Peter points out have given up everything – literally to drop everything to do with their old lives and walk into the new one. It's hardly surprising that Peter wants to know what they will receive in return.

The more I look at this morning's readings the more scary they seem to be. They are filled with characters who need to make big decisions about their lives and their faith. Even those undefined companions of Saul's must have either decided to stay or to go. It puts our own decisions into an uncomfortable light. 'No I really can't work with X'. How did Ananias feel? For him going to Saul wasn't just something that might give a rather prickly morning – potentially he would end up in prison. 'I'm going to say that I'm not available because it is all a bit complicated'. Well it was a bit complicated for Saul but he managed to be available for the rest of his life. Could I just walk out of an old life and into a new one? Even going away for a few days induces panic mode. And none of us know what we might be asked to give up or to take up. Would we step up? Where in all this topsy turvey place do we feel we belong?

Of course Jesus had no use for structure charts. (I'm sure they must have existed even if only informally – they feel very Roman!) In his kingdom ruled by faith and love there is no entitlement, no privilege obtained through status or wealth, nothing which is not earned by humility and consideration for others. This place where appointing the greatest opponent to be one of the greatest exponents is not just possible but it actually happened. This topsy turvey world where it is only possible to gain everything by first giving everything up. And where the most important people are the ones who have no control over what happens – like the Cubs who only joined recently.