

## Reading for Weekday in the Third Week of Eastertide

19<sup>th</sup> April 2024

### 1st Reading: Acts 9:1-20

*On the road to Damascus, Saul converts to the Way*

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

### Responsorial: Psalm 116

*R./: Go out to all the world, and tell the Good News.*

O praise the Lord, all you nations,  
acclaim him all you peoples! (R./)

Strong is his love for us;  
he is faithful for ever. (R./)

## **Gospel: John 6:52-59**

*A promise of life: "Whoever eats this bread will live forever."*

At that time the Jews disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

### **Short reflection on the reading for today**

Saint Paul's conversion is reported in three separate accounts in the Acts of the Apostles (see also 22:4-26; 26:12-18). The first of these, which was read today, leads on to the spread of the church beyond Judaism to the Gentile world. Immediately before it is another conversion story, about the Ethiopian pilgrim who was baptized by Philip the deacon; and soon afterwards comes the conversion of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Both the Ethiopian and Cornelius were received into the church without needing to first convert to Judaism (by circumcision and all the Jewish customs). The baptism of those two foreigners has the same sudden quality as Saul's conversion... each took place because of a special, divine intervention.

Saul had been vigorously opposing the church in Jerusalem, and now he proposed to do the same in Damascus. After his conversion, he would create an entirely new problem for the disciples of Jesus. In his fervent desire to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, Saul (now called Paul) insisted that there was no need to be circumcised or to follow many Jewish rules and regulations about food and drink, in order to be a follower of Jesus. His insistence on this point caused a serious split in the church that lasted for some years. This sharp quarrel surfaces in Paul's letter to the Galatians and in chapter 15 of Acts. For years he was branded as a traitor by his former Jewish colleagues, and was isolated even in the Christian community. When it was predicted that Paul would have much to suffer for Jesus' sake, it meant not just his eventual martyrdom but his long struggle for acceptance by the Jewish-conservative wing of the church.

Once he began to follow Jesus, both Paul and those who were Christians before him had to deal with the consequences. Not for years was it fully accepted that Paul's mission to the pagans was inspired by God, as the best way forward for the church. He may have bristled at the obstinacy of the conservatives, but eventually they all learned to compromise and share in the fraternity of the faith. This process of reconciliation is as vital for our church today as in the days of Peter and Paul.