**Acts 9.1-6; 10-19
Christians explain peoples’ spiritual experiences**

Last week we began a short sermon series for the Easter season looking at the topic of how we, as Christians and churches, are called to go and make disciples; to help people find a relationship with God through Jesus and live in relationship with him as part of his family.

Our first topic was **“Christians are witnesses”** – those who share something of what we have heard, seen and experienced of God.

This week, our topic is, **“Christians explain peoples’ spiritual experiences”.**

Now, I wonder if anyone has every said to you: ‘Oh, I’m not religious., but I am spiritual.”
It’s a really interesting phrase, isn’t it?

I think what people mean is that they really aren’t very interested in ‘organised’ religion… in church services run by an institution with all its rules and regulations and strange ways of doing things,

but that they do recognise that there is more to life than just what we can see and touch and rationally explain.

Interestingly, a recent survey reported that more people pray than believe in God!… which makes me wonder who or what the people who don’t believe in God think they are praying too!

But *really* interestingly, according to the Church of England young people are more likely to pray than their parents: 32% of young adults reporting that they had prayed in the last month, compared to only 25% of those aged 55+.

The Revd Dr Stephen Hance, National Lead for Evangelism and Witness for the Church of England, said (on the Church of England website):

*These findings really challenge the all-too-common assumption that young people are not interested in faith or spiritual things.*

*In fact they show us that - more than simply being interested in spirituality - they are already exploring it in practice, to a greater extent than their elders.*

*In an age when mindfulness and meditation are more popular than ever, prayer makes sense to people.*

Now, in a way, this shouldn’t surprise us, should it?

In Romans1.19-20, Paul talks about how God is evident in the world that he has created and in the way it works.

And David says: *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands”. (Psalm 19.1).*

There is evidence of God all around us.

But more than that, there is *inside* every human being, as we are all made in the image of God, a longing for connection to God.
David’s son, Solomon, wrote in Ecclesiastes 3.11:

*He has also set eternity in their heart.*

Of course, people can ignore the evidence around them or deny this inner longing.

Romans 1.18, Paul says that many people sadly suppress the truth.

But nonetheless, St Augustine summed it up well:
*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*

So, people ‘out there’ are interested in spiritual things, they are experimenting… and we know where to point them, so that their spiritual longing can be satisfied and their experimenting can lead to the discovery of the living God who made and loves them;

to his son, who as the good shepherd is on a journey to seek and save the lost.

Our reading for this week, from the book of Acts… you’ll remember that we’re using the life of the early church told in the book of Acts... our reading from the book of Acts, tells how God used one Christian to help someone interpret their spiritual experience… with amazing results…

Many of us will be familiar with the story.

Saul, a pharisee, is on his way to Damascus to root out those pesky Christians, arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment.

But on the way, Jesus appears to him in a flash of light.

Saul is blinded,

and is led by the hand into Damascus, where he fasts (spiritual practice!... Acts 9.9) and praying (Acts 9.11).

During this time, he has a vision (spiritual experience) of a man coming to lay hands on him and heal him of his blindness (9.12).

In the meantime, Ananias, a Christian, has a vision, and God tells him to go to Saul and lay hands on him.

Ananias is a bit concerned because he knows what Saul has come to Damascus for, but God graciously explains what’s going on and to his credit, up Ananias gets and goes to Saul to lay hands on him, and explain what has just happened to him.

And Saul’s life is never the same again.

Now, this is a pretty extreme example of someone having a spiritual experience and a Christian coming alongside them to help them make sense of what has happened.

But I think on rare occasions God does still work in this extreme way.

There are reports of Muslims living in ‘closed’ countries, who are genuinely seeking God, having visions of Jesus.

Jesus just appears to them…

Sometimes they are told when and where to go to meet a Christian who will explain the gospel to them.

But much more likely in our context, is that people we know simply have a longing for something ‘more’ than just the material, work – sleep – gain – lose – die, that this world has to offer.

They are searching and trying things…

Whether its crystals and angel workshops

Or praying,

Or even, as we said last week, just rocking up at church for want of anywhere better to go in search of spirituality.

And we have a wonderful opportunity to help interpret their spiritual longing and search and experiences… so that they might find what their restless heart is really longing for.

So, when someone says to you about an amazing sunset they’ve seen, what might we say?...

Maybe that it didn’t happen by chance, but that it was made by God as a pointer to him.

And maybe isn’t it wonderful how God has made us in his image so that we can appreciate it. I don’t think animals have the capacity to appreciate beauty…

Maybe that God intends the beauty of creation to lead us on to something more… to getting to know the One designed it and spoke it into being.

When someone talks to us about how they’ve tried “manifesting”… have you come across this?... apparently it’s a really big think…thinking a thought and putting it out into the universe so that it might happen… when someone tells us they’ve tried manifesting something, what might we say?

Maybe that instead of just putting a thought out into the universe, to try talking to the person who made the universe.

Maybe too, exploring what is behind the thing they’ve been manifesting, and sharing how Jesus is the one who can ultimately fulfil all our hopes and dreams.

And what about when someone who has lost a loved one plucks up the courage to tell us that they think they have “seen” their loved one who has died standing at the end of their bed in the night?

Are we just going to dismiss this?...

Or take it seriously?

Maybe this was God graciously giving someone a glimpse of a loved one to comfort and reassure.

Its not an invitation to visit a spiritualist or medium to contact he departed… the bible warns that this is very dangerous… but it might be an invitation to let a loved one go and entrust them to God.

And so… an invitation from God to share pain and sorrow with him, to seek his comfort, strength and peace… and to trust.

Returning to Acts 9, the impression we get from the text is that Ananias was used to listening to Jesus: verse 10:

*The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias”.*

*“Yes, Lord” he replied.*

What Jesus told Ananias to do possibly scared him.

He certainly just wanted to check that he was going to the right man.

But he was obedient and went as Jesus instructed.

And so, with Ananias’ help, Paul understood what had happened to him and what God’s will for his life was.

The rest is history…

Let’s be open, and even ask the Lord to show us, who around us is trying to make sense of spiritual things,

And let’s pray for the guidance of God’s Spirit, so that we might help them make sense of their experiences, and so find a relationship with the One who made and loves them.