

**Sermon / Kauwhau given at Service of Worship led by
Graham Redding,
at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand.
Sunday 4 May 2025**

Reading: Acts 9:1-20

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is one of the most dramatic and frequently cited passages in the Bible. So much so that the phrase "Damascus Road experience" has become a part of popular usage, often used to describe life-changing "aha" moments.

This morning, though, I want to focus not on Saul and his conversion but on the actions of Ananias. Ananias is introduced as a devout disciple living in Damascus, whom God calls upon in a vision. After Saul (later Paul) is blinded on the road to Damascus, God tells Ananias to go to him, lay hands on him, and restore his sight. Ananias is understandably hesitant, knowing Saul's reputation for persecuting Christians, but he obeys. He plays a key role in launching Saul's apostolic mission to the Gentiles.

Ananias' name is a Greek translation of a Hebrew word meaning "the Lord is gracious". Ananias lives up to his name. Through his courageous actions, he becomes the human face of God's mercy towards Saul, an ambassador of reconciliation, a bridgebuilder.

There is one word that epitomises this bridgebuilding act of reconciliation: when Ananias calls Saul, "Brother." It carries immense weight. It is a word that conveys reconciliation, welcome, and dignity. Saul had been terrorising Christians, yet Ananias calls him brother before he has done a single thing to earn Ananias' trust.

Ananias didn't become famous. He didn't go on missionary journeys. But without him, Saul might not have become Paul. We often want big platforms or clear outcomes. Ananias reminds us that God calls us to faithful, small, and sometimes courageous acts of obedience, some of which may shape the future more than we know. Discipleship is not about visibility—it's about availability.

Ananias is a hinge point in redemptive history. He stands alongside other biblical hinge point figures like the Egyptian midwives Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1) who defied Pharaoh's command to kill Hebrew baby boys and in so doing quietly preserved the next generation—including Moses, the liberator of Israel. A hinge point in God's redemptive plan.

He stands alongside Ruth, a Moabite widow who clung to Naomi, her Israelite mother-in-law, committed herself to Naomi's God and her people and became the great-grandmother of King David, and part of Jesus' lineage. Her loyalty and love become a quiet thread woven God's covenantal plan. Another hinge point in God's redemptive plan.

He stands alongside Lydia (Acts 16), a dealer in purple cloth and a "worshiper of God" who opened her home to the Apostle Paul and his companions, becoming the first recorded European convert and host of the first house church in Philippi. Her hospitality became a beachhead for the gospel in Europe. Another hinge point in God's redemptive plan.

And what about outside the Bible?

Everybody has heard of Martin Luther King Jr. But how many of you have heard of Bayard Rustin? Before Martin Luther King, there was Bayard Rustin, a black civil rights activist who was deeply influenced by Quaker pacifism and the teachings of Gandhi. When King was an up-and-coming civil rights leader in the 1950s, it was Rustin who persuaded him to embrace nonviolence not just as a tactic, but as a worldview rooted in love and justice. "The only weapon we have is our bodies," he said, "We must tuck them in places so wheels don't turn."

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was one of the most significant events of the Civil Rights era—where King delivered the famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Rustin was the chief organiser of the march, responsible for logistics, security, and communications, coordinating the transport and peaceful protest of over 250,000 people.

Rustin was openly gay at a time when that made him a political liability. Civil rights leaders pressured him to step back from a visible leadership role, knowing that segregationist politicians would exploit his sexuality to discredit him. He took on the role of strategic advisor and coalition builder, advising King behind the scenes, and encouraging coalition politics that linked civil rights to economic justice.

Though Rustin was sidelined during his life, history has caught up to his importance. President Obama posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013 and in 2023 Netflix released a biographical film about his contribution to America's civil rights movement. Bayard Rustin was an Ananias figure, a hinge point in history.

Here in Aotearoa, we have plenty of Anaias figures of our own. Annie Henry was one such figure. Born in Riverton, Southland, Annie Henry trained as a teacher and later became a Presbyterian deaconess. In 1916, at the age of 37,

she was appointed by the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand to serve as a missionary in Ruatāhuna, a remote community in the Te Urewera region, predominantly inhabited by the Tūhoe people .

Annie Henry dedicated over three decades (1917–1948) to living and working among the Tūhoe. She immersed herself in the community, learning te reo Māori and local tikanga. Her work extended beyond spiritual guidance; she provided education, healthcare, and social support, embodying a holistic approach to missionary work. Much like Ananias in the Book of Acts, who was called to minister to Saul, Annie Henry stepped into a role that required courage, faith, and a deep commitment to reconciliation and understanding. She built bridges between cultures, offering compassion and support in a context where mistrust and cultural divides were significant.

Moana Jackson, who died in 2022, was another Aotearoa Ananias figure. He was one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most respected and prophetic legal minds—a deeply humble, fiercely intelligent Māori scholar whose work reshaped conversations around justice, sovereignty, and the place of Māori in their own land. Like Ananias, Jackson's influence was often quiet, less about being in the spotlight and more about enabling others to see, speak, and live in truth. His legacy is immense—not just in law, but in the spirit of a country searching for justice.

As many of you know, I teach chaplaincy studies at the University. I train people for chaplaincy roles. I regard prison chaplains as Ananias figures. Often operating behind the scenes, walking alongside people at their lowest ebb, facing guilt, shame, despair, or injustice, they don't demand proof of worthiness. Like Ananias, they trust that even the most unlikely person can be transformed. They listen without judgment, assure people that Jesus loves them, and invite them into a future that grace makes possible. They step toward those whom society fears or rejects. They see the image of God where others see only a record of wrongs. They are midwives of transformation in places many would rather avoid. Ananias didn't get credit for Paul's letters or missions—but without him, Paul's ministry might not have started at all. Similarly, prison chaplains rarely appear in headlines, but they plant seeds that become testimonies, second chances, reconciliations, even new ministries.

Do you see a common thread running through these narratives?

As much as I admire Saul's Damascus Road conversion, as much as I acknowledge its historical significance for the transformation and growth of the early church, I find myself being drawn to the quiet and unobtrusive bridge making ministry of Ananias and seeing in his courageous work grounds for encouragement and inspiration:

Learning to pray for one's enemies—even if one's voice shakes. Learning to welcome someone the world has written off. Learning to make space for someone else's healing or transformation. Learning to be a presence of peace in a place of fear. Learning to say "yes" to God when the outcome isn't guaranteed.

Gracious and Holy God,

*You called Ananias by name and gave him a task that tested his trust.
You asked him to lean into his fear — and he did so with faith.*

*As we reflect on his story,
open our ears to your voice,
open our hearts to your call,
open our eyes to see your work among us.*

*When we hesitate, give us courage.
When we feel unworthy, remind us of your grace.*

*And as you once used the hands of Ananias to bring sight and healing,
use our lives now to bring peace, truth, and reconciliation
in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.*

Amen

Knox Presbyterian Church, Ōtepoti Dunedin

Our vision is to see the reign of God, made known in Jesus, have a transformative effect on people's lives and on the world in which we live.



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