

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, RONDEBOSCH

SERMON for the CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL, 26TH JANUARY 2014

“To encourage them to respond to God’s calling”

May I speak in the name of God, who is + Father and Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

I must say that it’s wonderful to be back here at St Paul’s, and thank you, Fr. Derek, for inviting me to preach at the parish’s Patronal Festival. It is, for me, an especial privilege because this is also the Sunday closest to the first anniversary of my ordination, but, most of all, it is simply just very good to be home again!

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Today is, of course, all about conversion, which is – one might say – a type of change-of-direction, a re-focusing, a change-of-life; but is also a response to a call, a reaction to God’s initiative, an act of obedience.

We all know the story of Saul-who-became-Paul, the over-zealous scholar and God-fearer who misunderstood God’s message, who misunderstood God’s *calling*, who, “full of threats and hate”¹ instead of love, persecuted the early Jewish Christians; but became, by means of the Risen Christ’s miraculous intervention, the greatest evangelist of the Church. In the Book of Acts², Paul describes his conversion experience to King Agrippa:

“... I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon ... I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing

around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. ... I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. ... Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness ... I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light ... so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place amongst those who are sanctified by faith in me.’”³

Saul’s Damascus road conversion is usually held up as an example of a miraculous, charismatic, sudden conversion-experience, an example in stark contrast to the more gradual form of accumulative exposure to the Divine that leads to conversion over many years or even a lifetime. Some even go so far as to suggest that Saul’s type of ecstatic experience is a necessity, the only true evidence, for true conversion: if you have not had some such event in your lives, then (they suggest) you are not quite converted.

I’m not quite so sure about the first point, and certainly don’t agree with the second. That expression that Jesus uses, “*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*”⁴, and even Saul’s very zealousness in his acts of persecution, suggests to me a person who has already been hearing the small, quiet, nearly silent voice of God’s calling, and is determined, with every fibre of his being, to resist it.

But Saul’s resistance is futile. Jesus intervenes decisively in his life and *commands* him to enter into his service. Saul’s life

is utterly changed, so much that he even needs a new identity, a new name to distinguish his new self from his old. Saul we must now call Paul, and in the moment of his conversion, he also receives a new authority and commission – from God, replacing that of the chief priests – a vocation to carry that eye-burningly-bright light of Christ into the darkness of the world.

In taking on that authority and commission, his vocation in other words, Paul embarks on a lifetime's journey of seeking to understand and fulfil his conversion. I think that if you follow Paul's career you can discern an ongoing conversion experience. In fact he specifically refers to this in *Ephesians*. Like all of us, he is not simply a sinner and then suddenly, after the Damascus road, a saint – he never ceases to grow in maturity and understanding until he faces imprisonment and martyrdom.

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There is, it strikes me in all this, rather a fine line between “conversion” and “vocation” ... does not the one seem to inherently incorporate the other? The act of conversion is, as much as the discernment of a vocation, an act of obedient response to God's call.

All of us are called to discern that Voice, however it may come to us – and that is and will be as unique to each of us as we each are ourselves unique – and to respond in obedience to our Lord.

We know what we ought to do; we can all hear that Voice calling us, whispering, quietly, nearly silently, in our ear but we resist.

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Because this week is the first anniversary of my ordination as a deacon, the issue of “calling” and vocation is rather on my mind.

I resisted my vocation fiercely. I went through the whole process twice: I was first accepted for the priesthood in 1998, but withdrew, reluctantly re-started years later and was ordained in 2013. 17-years in the process is a record I think!

So, when the Bishop asked me at the start of the ordination service, on that platform there, below this pulpit, “*Do you believe that God is calling you to this ministry?*” and I answered, “*I do so believe*”, I had come a very long way. I don’t think I was quite certain that I could positively answer that question until I actually did so!

For me, ordination was also a conversion experience.

So you would have thought, or I would have thought, that you could at that stage say, “OK, there it is – all is realised, all that self-doubt and anxiety and work is at last come to fruition”, but the very next day I realised I’d only just begun ... A year down the line, I have been pondering what brought me to this point and find that I am faced with a continuous line of questioning:

- here I am, so what of it?
- is this where God wills me to be?
- how should I be living out my calling?
- is my current form of service at St George’s the best and fullest expression of this vocational ministry?
- where am I headed to, what is the future?

I don't mean these questions in any negative way, but I have come to realise that these sort of issues arise whenever you reach a point where you think you have achieved whatever that is needed.

As I have said, for all of us the process of finding and understanding your vocation, whatever it may be, is a lifetime's journey.

Probably not all of us are quite as stubborn and disobedient as *me*, but all of us are a little – we need the help of others to interpret our call to conversion and the encouragement of others to respond to it in obedience so that our vocations can be realised ... (and I owe much to the people of St Paul's in that regard).

But, here it needs to be said – and I know that you know I was going to say this! – that there is not one of you here today that does not have a God-given vocation. God, quietly, nearly silently, is whispering in all of our ears, all of your ears, that you, me, need to work for the glory of his name and respond to his call.

Fortunately for you (perhaps) most are not called to the ministry of deacon or priest or bishop – but some of you are. The Church has many ministries, all important, none dispensable. Even a priest can express his or her ministry-as-a-priest in many ways – and so can everyone else.

Are you a lay-minister, parish councillor, chorister, caretaker, Sunday School teacher, maintenance-worker, prayer-group member, sacristan, steward, typist, organiser, churchwarden,

fund-raiser, cook, hospital visitor, cleaner, altar-server, youth leader?

If you're none of those things (or anything else), should you not be? If you are one of those things already, have you reviewed your work and are you called to more? If you think you are not called to serve, or are not in some way able to fulfil a role in the Church, think again!

In the Old Testament reading this morning,⁵ we heard Jeremiah's testimony about his discernment of a calling to prophesy. When we read these texts, there is often something in us that says, "This is about Jeremiah, or about Paul; it's about people who lived long ago, in a different place and time; it's nothing to do with me". But I don't think that's true. The Bible is not just a history book, a collection of historical tales. The power of the Bible is that the texts speak to us, are meant to speak to us, who read them now. These words apply to all of us, to me and to you too:

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
Before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you"*⁶

God has called us, called you, like Paul and Jeremiah, from your mother's womb. There's nothing you can do about it. You can resist all you like – and I know what I'm talking about – but you'll never have true peace until you respond. God and God's Church need you because God's work is done through God's people.

Like many of us, Jeremiah feebly protests, he says,

*"Ah, Sovereign LORD, ... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."*⁷

But as with Paul, as with us, God has no interest in that. He's not interested in false modesty or our essentially selfish claims to unworthiness. To both Jeremiah and Paul and us, his Church in Rondebosch in the 21st Century, he replies:

*“Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you ... for I am with you ... I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to tear down, to build and to plant.”*⁸

We are all members of the Church, because God, in very different ways unique to each person, has called us to be. It is our duty to listen and respond, to uproot and plant, to tear down and build.

One of the things that really strikes me about today's Gospel-reading⁹ is that Jesus on the road does not go to the blind beggar to heal him but calls Bar-Timaeus to approach him. God calls us; it is *our* duty to respond and be healed. Unlike so many of us, Bar-Timaeus, having cried out to God to hear him, does respond to that call: he immediately leaps up, flings off his cloak and goes. Healed, seeing that marvellous light, he does not hesitate to follow Jesus along the road.

We must do the same. Now is the time to respond to his call – why not? It's a new year; it's as good a time as any!

Follow him!

AMEN.

¹ Acts 9:1

² Acts 26:9-23 is the alternative reading for this day, not used liturgically.

³ Acts 26:12-18

⁴ Acts 26:14c

⁵ Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁶ verse 5

⁷ verse 6

⁸ verses 7-10

⁹ Mark 10:46-52