

20160124Draft of Sermon for Conversion of Paul

Today is our Patronal Festival. Our Parish Church here in Rondebosch is dedicated to St Paul and on the Feast day of St Paul we celebrate another year under his patronage.

The development of churches being dedicated to saints is quite interesting. It begun during the early days of the church while the Roman authorities were still persecuting Christians and Church leaders in particular. You can imagine the devastating effect the arrest of your members and your leader must have on a believing community. As the Christians were thrown to the lions or other wild beasts in arenas or merely executed for not worshipping the Roman Emperor, the believers most probably collect the remains and gave them a Christian burial. Knowing where their saintly leaders were buried, led to members gathering at the graveside for Christian worship. Perhaps they were buried in the famous catacombs in Rome and so the story developed that Christians fearing persecution, worshipped in the catacombs. Perhaps it was merely gathering at their beloved leader's grave. Once persecution of the Church ceased after Constantine saw the vision of the cross in the sky and made Christianity the official state religion, those who had gathered in catacombs built chapels and churches over the graves of their deceased leaders and thus these buildings gradually took on the name of the saint or believer buried underneath the building.

Now, those of you who use the Lectionary for weekday services, will see a year given after the name of each saint and, of course, day of the year being the saint's day. What makes this unusual is that a Saint's Day is not his or her **birth** day but **death** day – the day on which the Saint died and joined his or her maker in the heavenly realm – that is the day on which we commemorate their lives and actions.

We know that both Peter and Paul died in Rome, but although the Catholic Church claims that Peter's remains are buried under the Basilica of St Peter's we do not know the actual day he was executed. Certainly, I've never heard of the remains of Paul being found and likewise the day on which he died is not known. But these two are such major leaders in the Christian Church and if we are going to give a day to commemorate some less important saints, surely there must be at least one day for St Peter and St Paul.

I think the Church did a very wise thing which is quite unusual for the church. The Church leaders realised that even in the scriptures there appears to be some rivalry between Peter and Paul, so why not commemorate them both on the same day? After all, their characters were so contrasting perhaps by celebrating their lives, ministry and deaths on the same day, the people would get the message that whether you were an intellectual theologian or a spontaneous person of action, the church welcomed you and celebrated you as they celebrated the intellect of theologian Paul and spontaneity and action of Peter.

This single feast is the 29 June when both Peter and Paul are commemorated. But soon additional feast and festival crept into the Church's calendar. Checking on Google I found, the Feast of St Peter's Chains, Feast of St Peter's Chair, Feast of St Peter ad Vincula or the liberating of Peter and the Confession of Peter. Paul has a lot fewer feasts – besides the combined feast with Peter and one kept in Malta – the Feast of the Shipwreck of Paul, there is his conversion that we keep here at St Paul's Rondebosch as our patronal festival. In the Anglican Calendar we keep only two feasts for Peter and Paul – the combined one in June and the Confession of Peter on last Monday, 18 January, and the Conversion of Paul a week later on 25 January.

In there wisdom, our forefathers here at St Paul's Rondebosch decided to make this Conversion of Paul our Patronal Festival, so at least we don't have to wear the red liturgical robes for the death of a martyr – which Paul was, of course. But we are celebrating his conversion rather than his life as a whole.

Luke, in the second part of his Gospel which we know as the Acts of the Apostles describes the conversion of Paul on three separate occasions. The first, perhaps the most famous is in Chapter 9:1-19. It is Luke's own description while the other two are Paul himself describing his conversion. These are in Acts 22 and our lesson this morning Acts 26. Acts 22 is after Paul was arrested in the Temple and he had to defend himself against the temple authorities. Acts 26 he defends himself against King Agrippa in the hope that he would not be sent to Rome and certain imprisonment and death.

Paul's own description in our Lesson has some significant points. Paul was going to Damascus to continue to persecute those who had accepted Jesus. Suddenly the whole party see a light from heaven brighter than the sun, and he hears a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He asked who it was and the response is: "Jesus who you are persecuting". Jesus then goes on to say why he had appeared to Paul. There was a purpose for

the vision. Paul was to serve and testify to things he had seen and throughout this episode we get the theme of darkness and light coming through.

But if I were to ask you what you remember most about the conversion of Paul, I'm sure you would say how the vision was so sudden and how Paul did a complete about turn in his belief. This idea of suddenness and complete reversal has even been adopted into the English language to explain any sudden change in a person. We say things like, "My acceptance of Banting Diet was like a Damascus Road Experience as I immediately gave up eating carbs and lost kilograms."

But my question is, "Was in so sudden?" – not the Banting diet bit but Paul's conversion. We all know that Paul was leading the persecution of Christians. Luke even tells us that when Stephen was stoned to death, Saul, as he was known at that time, stood guard over the coats of those casting stones. So he was in the forefront of opposition to Christians. Psychologists often tell us that when our values and morals are threatened in any way, we tend to become even more fanatical in trying to preserve them. So, Paul who says in Acts 22 said: 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God' was he really that zealous to God in his heart of hearts? Or was it his crutch? Because his Jewish values and traditions were being challenged this led him to demonstrate this "zeal for the God" by means of persecuting those who threatened his values and beliefs. Or was he being moved in his heart by the Jesus message? I suppose we will never know for sure, but I would like to think that it was, because it then gives me hope about my own conversion.

My conversion to Christianity was not sudden. Even my calling to the priesthood had a very long gestation period. As we say in our ordination service, I believed I was so called at the age of 16 but it was not until I was 40 before I did anything formal, like attending Fellowship of Vocation, Vocational Guidance Conference or theological college.

What about you? What was your conversion like? I went to my daughter's Brethren Chapel once when they sung a song where the chorus named the seven days of the week. It was an action song sung seated and as the day on which you accepted Jesus in your life appeared in the Chorus you had to leap to your feet. It was wonderful to see how these young people knew exactly when Jesus came into their lives. So, the chapel was filled with people bobbing up and down continually; except for Karen and me, our bottoms remained firmly in our seats. We couldn't name the day when we were converted.

I suppose the question I am asking is, how important is it to know and name the day? Yes, I know that we are not 'born' Christian just because our parents are Christian. But is knowing the date, time and year that important? Yes, I suppose it is exciting to do an about turn and to begin to follow Jesus. But isn't a slow gradual coming-about like a large mega tanker, just as exciting and relevant?

Perhaps your conversion was a gradual change of attitude towards others, perhaps like Paul you decided that you were called to serve in some church organization – like the pastoral task team that feeds the homeless once a month. Or perhaps like Paul you felt that you had to stop the rot in the community you belong to, where everyone was doing things which you viewed as wrong but merely said, "Well, everyone does it..." but you decided you would not, that you would try to bring light to the darkness. And so gradually you started to think and feel in a different way and perhaps you suddenly realised that you had now become a true Christian.

According to the dictionary, conversion means *a change in form, character, or function*. In a conversion such as I've described above, your character and function changed. You changed from a non-Christian to a Christian. But what about Paul? What did he change from? And to what did he change? After all, he was a good practising Jew – as he himself admits. Surely that was pleasing to God? And now he was a follower of Christ, believing Christ to be the Messiah. But he still would have worshipped Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He would still have attended Synagogue on the Sabbath. Were there any differences in Paul's character? Yes, there were. And certainly there were differences in his function. No longer was his function the persecution of those who followed Christ but rather the exact opposite. Paul's role became that of a missionary, bring the Good News of Jesus to as many people as possible, as many people who would listen.

Paul's character changed dramatically. A good Jew would normally give thanks to God that he was born a Jew and not a Gentile and that he was born a male and not a female. Yet Paul's missionary journeys were to the Gentiles. He was even willing to travel up to Jerusalem to defend his stand on converting the gentiles to the Christian faith

against those who insisted on converts undergoing Jewish rituals such as circumcision. He had travelled around the Gentile world and had established churches in many gentile cities. The Book of Acts relates this. And in many of the Church we find women in charge, women as the leaders. We hear Paul greeting them in his letters. A good 1st Century Jew allowing that?! That is a dramatic change.

It was not purely on evidence from Acts that we can say this. In fact writing to the Galatians he wrote: *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* These few verses really show the dramatic change in Paul after his conversion. They are words that touch my heart too. In fact, I believe that they demonstrate exactly what is happening here at St Paul's Rondebosch. You, the parishioners here, have been baptised in Christ, you are no longer South African or Nigerian or Zimbabwean or Zambian or Angolan or Namibian. You are no longer slave or free, no longer male or female. You are all one in Christ, you are, as Paul says Children of God through faith.

Each year at this Patronal Festival, the choirmaster and I used to spend a lot of time trying to find a suitable anthem to sing on this feast day. Knowing this, I decided to commission an anthem, as my farewell gift to St Paul's. I asked well-known local composer, Stephen Carletti to compose an anthem using these very words: *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* Because to me these words demonstrate the conversion Paul went through and also the multi-culture aspect of this parish where we are all Children of God through faith.

Now, that is Paul's conversion. But have **you** truly been converted to Christianity? Have you change in form character and function? Before I was ordained I was a Medical Technologist, I used to carry out chemical tests on peoples blood, urine and stools now I no longer work with their specimens, I work with the people themselves. That is a change of function for me. What about you? Has your form, character and function changed since you began to follow Christ?

I believe that our entire lives are filled with little conversions, most of which we are not aware of. Our lives change, our character, function and form change. We are converted in tiny little steps until the time comes when we look back and see how we **have** changed, how we **have** been converted. What are these little conversions? As we grow up to adulthood there comes a time when we stop living with our family and we start to living alone or with friends. That is a conversion. Then we enter into relationships different from our family. Then we marry. Then the children come along; one to two or more. As each child is born our lives are converted to something different, our character changes our function is different. Time passes and the children grown up and move out. Another conversion; retirement – difficult for some, I hope not for me... A spouse dies – a conversion back to living alone. All these changes, conversions in our lives can be sudden or we can have time to prepare ourselves for them. There are many other little events in our lives which happen and these make us approach things differently, but with the knowledge that this is all part of God's plan for us, and that God will assist us in this conversion process

As we celebrate our Patronal Festival, we not only celebrate the life and actions of Paul but more specifically his conversion. So, what can Paul's conversion teach us? I believe that from his conversion we can learn something spiritual and practical – that God has a plan for each of us, that God will carry out that plan in us regardless of our wants and desires, that this carrying out of God's plan is in fact a conversion and this conversion can be huge and sudden or gradual and little and, that we must be open to what God has planned for us.

Paul often spoke about a pain in his side, a pain he had to bear for Christ's sake. Some people think he was talking metaphorically, it wasn't a literal pain but a psychological one. Perhaps that pain he refers to is his struggle to bridge the gap between his head and his heart. He knew in his mind what God wanted and he really struggled to live up to those standards which his mind told him to do, but his culture and tradition (his heart) occasionally broke through – as when he seems to attack women in some of his writings. But for me that merely shows that he was human, and like me occasionally fell short of the ideal but as he said to those Galatians: *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

I call on the choir to sing Stephen Carletti's musical setting of those words as we think about our conversion and how we must be Children of God through faith.