

## ST PAUL'S CHURCH, RONDEBOSCH

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### SERMON for THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL: EVENSONG, 24<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2016

*“To encourage them in living out their vocations during the interregnum.”*

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

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This is not only the parish's annual patronal festival but also a seminal moment marking the end and beginning of two ministerial eras in this place.

Tonight, your Rector<sup>1</sup> commences his retirement and the parish starts what's likely to be a drawn-out interregnum. This bears promises for the future, but calls for introspection and consideration of the past. What the last decade-or-so means for each of us will differ, but it has I think been a good ten-years both for you, Fr Derek, and for the Parish. It has certainly brought much change!

(From a personal point of view, it has been a very seminal time and I consider myself very privileged indeed to be asked to preach this evening. I owe you a great deal, Fr. Derek, but that's another conversation).

Perhaps the feast of the Conversion of Paul is a really apposite ground for reflection on this moment of new change, because it raises so very clearly the issues of God's will, both for you, all of you individually, and also collectively for the parish.

What is God's will for you? What is God calling on you to do? How does your vocation find its full expression in a season of change like this one?

I cannot agree with those<sup>2</sup> who consider an interregnum to be a good thing. It isn't easy. It's particularly hard on the lay leadership of a parish. Many things that one is normally justifiably entitled to assume will be done, will suddenly cease to be done; visions will be placed on hold. It takes time to run an organisation and the single biggest time-giving resource that the parish has, will now not be there.

You might think that an interregnum puts a parish somewhat in the place of poor old Ezekiel!

*"[The Spirit] spoke to me and said, 'Go, shut yourself up in your house. And you, O son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people. I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them ...' "*<sup>3</sup>

But, as for the Bible's tragic prophet, this isn't an excuse for rest and inaction. The Church, if it isn't to betray itself and its own identity as a "Church", isn't able to rest from its call to ministry and praise. Even hampered and restrained, you are still called to ministry in God's name: like Ezekiel, all tied up, but still required to overcome:

*" '... when I speak to you, you will open your mouth and you shall say to them "This is what the Sovereign LORD says. ' "*<sup>4</sup>

We can be promised this: neither retirement for Fr Derek nor interregnum for the Parish brings pause (let alone an end) to

the lifetime's work of living out your vocation. It simply brings change to the means and manner.

I nearly said it “merely” brings change. “Merely” it isn't. How we adapt to change is a big question: appropriate this evening, because Saul's Damascus Road-experience is about nothing if it isn't about radical change and the vocational challenges that change brings.

Saul's conversion, and all of our respective, different and unique conversion experiences are God's call to us, not to passive faith, but to an active response. That's what vocation is – it is a summoning to service, to action in God's name.

God's call, as we all should already know, cannot be ignored; it's pointless to attempt to resist it; and it's futile to believe that it doesn't change us. Once we have responded to that insistent call, we cannot be the same; in a real sense, we are not in fact the same people.

After the Damascus Road epiphany,<sup>5</sup> Saul, the over-zealous and vengeful persecutor of the Church, became, in real truth, a new person named Paul, apostle to the gentiles, saint and martyr of the Faith. So radical was the change in his outlook and relationship with God, and God's people, that even his name had to change. His had a new identity.

So, in a way, it is for us all.

Paul's experience is often thought of as a unique or exceptional experience. That is both true and false. True, because it was indeed a unique experience, because Saul was a unique and special individual, an extraordinary exception.

But false, because we, you, all people, are individually also unique and special individuals, and each of us are also an extraordinary exception.

God calls us each uniquely because we are all unique. But, whatever way we may each be individually called, we are indisputably all called. We are all called to a new identity.

Here is a parable (as told by Archbishop Rowan Williams)<sup>6</sup> which seems particularly apposite this evening:

*“Rabbi Yehuda Leow ben Bezael was the greatest rabbi of his age ..., the man who, in his house in Prague, created the Golem, the animated form of a man, to which he gave life by putting under its tongue a slip of paper bearing the Unutterable Name of God. One night, Rabbi Yehuda had a dream: he dreamt that he had died and was brought before the throne. And the angel who stands before the throne said to him, ‘Who are you?’ ‘I am Rabbi Yehuda of Prague, the maker of the Golem,’ he replied. ‘Tell me, my lord, if my name is written in the book of the names of those who will have a share in the kingdom.’ ‘Wait here,’ said the angel, ‘I shall read the names of all those who died today that are written in the book.’ And he read the names, thousands of them, strange names to the ears of Rabbi Yehuda; as the angel read, the rabbi saw the spirits of those whose names had been called fly into the glory that sat above the throne. At last he finished reading, and Rabbi Yehuda’s name had not been called, and he wept bitterly and cried out against the angel. And the angel said, ‘I have called your name.’ Rabbi Yehuda said, ‘I did not hear it.’ And the angel said, ‘In the book are written the names of all the*

*men and women who have ever lived on the earth, for every soul is an inheritor of the kingdom. But many come here who have never heard their true names on the lips of man or angel. They have lived believing that they know their names; and so when they are called to their share in the kingdom, they do not hear their names as their own. They do not recognise that it is for them that the gates of the kingdom are opened. So they must wait here until they hear their names and know them. Perhaps once in their lifetime one man or woman has once called them by their right name: here they shall stay until they have remembered. Perhaps no-one has ever called them by their right name: here they shall stay till they are silent enough to hear the King of the Universe himself calling them.'*

*At this, Rabbi Yehuda woke and, rising from his bed with tears, he covered his head and lay prostrate on the ground and prayed, 'Master of the Universe! Grant me once before I die to hear my own true name on the lips of my brothers!'*”

At least one of the messages of this tale is that, in a deeply mysterious way, our real selves, our true identities, are defined by our willingness to hear and respond to God's call.

No matter what we strive to achieve, or even what we achieve, even if that is done in God's name and in God's power, it counts for very little if it is not in accordance with God's will for us. God's will isn't arbitrary fancy – on the contrary, it is God gently helping us to know ourselves and our salvation. And, yes, it is also God working in us collectively, helping, discerning and encouraging each other to better-know that will too.

Change is hard; it involves struggle and, unavoidably, suffering of some kind. The tragic prophet Ezekiel's story of humiliation and debasement illustrates that. Saint Paul's story also illustrates that. Hearing and acting on God's call isn't easy, but it is imperative for us to individually and collectively discern and respond. We simply must.

We don't need to like it, but interregnum does have one benefit; and, oddly, that benefit is not unlike the more desirable benefits of retirement: both of these new modes of life oblige us to consider and challenge our own sense of commitment, both to the Church and the wider community.

--- In retirement, Fr Derek, you will surely be called upon to do things that need to be done: perhaps things that you'd never before considered doing. Retirement will demand that you stand up and be counted in a new way.

--- In an interregnum, fellow-Christians, if something needs being done, it is you, each of you, that will need to do it; if there is something that must be done better, it is you that need to contribute to it; if there is an issue, an outreach, an initiative that cries for attention, then the initiative is yours to grasp.

How will you serve? Have you heard the call of the King of the Universe, perhaps speaking through your fellow-believers? What is your own 'true name' by which the Master calls you?

Now, once again, it is the time to hear and respond!

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> since 2005

<sup>2</sup> the bishop

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 3:24b-26

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 3:27

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9:1-22

<sup>6</sup> Williams, R.: *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*. UK: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1994; pp.176-7