

The Conversion of St Paul for St Paul's church
Rondebosch, Sermon 24 January 2021

Lovely to be part of your patronal festival today. St Paul's holds so many good memories for me and my whole family – we have made so many lifelong friends from your community.

From the Acts of the Apostle's chapter 9

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

I have heard it said about St Paul that you either love him or hate him. When it comes to the place of women and marriage he is something of a problem.

However, next to Jesus he is the most towering and influential figure in Christian history. Some even say that he changed Christianity and turned it into a world religion.

The *Conversion of St Paul* was certainly a key moment in the development and spread of Christianity. Christianity had captured and won over one of the most promising young men of 1st Century Judaism.

Paul was a Pharisee, a rabbi with important friends in the Jewish and Roman establishment.

He was a student of Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the time, and no doubt a powerful orator. He certainly had blood on his hands – he was there when Stephen was stoned – he went on to try and wipe out the Christian movement.

He was a tent-maker – and the Romans needed tents. He was wealthy.

He was in charge of the Temple guard, a man of weapons, in charge of security and keeping the peace.

In the reading today he recounts before King Agrippa how he was converted while on a mission to put down the troublesome Christian movement in Damascus – a journey that changed his life forever.

What follows, I think, is his most notable achievement at tremendous physical and mental cost to himself:

The Christian movement was a small insignificant movement within the Jewish world. Paul was to turn it into a World-wide movement.

He thrust it into the Greek and Roman world- walked miles in spreading the Word of Jesus, countless journeys into Asia Minor, Greece and finally Rome, infiltrating the different cultures with the Christian message – he was by no means

zenophobic, and afraid of strangers and other cultures. In fact he was all-embracing.

Here was someone who could challenge the Jewish academic world, and the philosophes of the Greeks of his day. (Pause)

How much did Paul change Christianity? Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God – Paul never uses that phrase. He talks about being *in Christ* – within a physical and spiritual community and dedicated to living and spreading the Word – who is Jesus Christ the living Lord – remember no written gospel existed in his time.

He understood more clearly than all the disciples that for a foreigner to become a Christian, they did not have to become a Jew first. *No* said St Paul - Faith in Jesus, **the Son of God** made you a Christian - not circumcision into Judaism.

In Athens, he could appeal to their understanding of the *Unknown God* who created all things.

With Paul *the Cross* becomes central to the Christian faith. It is the great saving and reconciling event *in which God was in Christ reconciling the World to himself*, and we are invited to become ministers of reconciliation. Oh how we need to hear that over and over again. *In Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.* 2 Cor. 5;17

The Cross, the self-giving of Jesus on the Cross is central to his understanding of the Gospel

Wonderful passages in Colossians and Ephesian, of the cosmic Christ – He is *the image of the invisible God, the*

firstborn of all creation, and of the depth and energy of the Holy Spirit's work in creation and in the church. Col 1:15

And then and most importantly, there is *simplicity* and power
of Love in .1 Corinthians 13.

If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal

¹² *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

¹³ *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Here was someone whom it is seems was converted in a moment. Saw flashing lights. Became blind – could see.

Perhaps there are people here who had that experience?

Who Have come to say like Paul and Bartimaeus, I was blind!
 Now I see.

As we live through this pandemic, let it be with our eyes open to the wonderful humanity we see in Jesus

Let it be with the openness and inclusiveness of Paul to enter with Christ into other peoples cultures,

Knowing that *in Christ* we are a new creation.

That *the cross* leads us to compassion for others

That we are *ambassadors of Reconciliation*, and not of strife or despair

That the *tenacious love* of a Paul is in us too to move us and shape us

Conversion of St Paul (Music)

Breathing

Lord, there are moments when I am on the road to Damascus, all certain and self-confident, espousing a cause. When others are at the knife edge of my tongue.

Lord, there are moments when I have fallen, when all my certainty is lost. When my values are threatened and confidence is gone. When I can hardly see through swollen eyes.

Lord, there are moments of surrender, when others must lead me. Smaller people than myself, a foot soldier, an office worker, a messenger like Ananias.

And because of them, there are moments, Lord, when things swell together in the refreshing waters of renewal, as my life is whole once again. Moments when I am being led by you – when the scales are lifted, and the road to Damascus becomes my road to freedom.

May the light which shone so blindingly
On the road to Damascus
Shine brightly on the road on which we journey
As pilgrims and citizens,
So that we may rise
From the present,
With God's vision of the future.

Other reflections on my Blog: <https://wp.me/p51XOn-xe>