

Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's Wimbledon, 24th January, 2016, on the Conversion of St. Paul.

Three themes that we could explore today are The Conversion of St. Paul, The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or Homelessness Sunday. I'm going to start with the Conversion of St. Paul.

We may all know zealous people who may have an obsession for football, golf, classical music, food or drink. Whenever we meet them they may talk non-stop on their favourite subject. In today's world we see some young people radicalised to the extent that they become zealots of the worst kind joining organisations such as ISL or Boko Haram.

The young Saul of Tarsus too became a zealot. He was an educated man who may well have spoken Aramaic, Hebrew and knew Latin, but his main tongue was the international language of all time, common Greek. With his Pharisaic background Saul would have been steeped in Jewish traditions of prayer and meditation. He was a practical man too having been trained as a tent maker.

Saul's obsession was to track down "*People of the Way*", in other words Christians, with the authority the High Priest and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem. We heard how Saul was a witness to Stephen's brutal death by stoning. But God moves in mysterious ways and uses the most unlikely people to serve him. Saul is on his way to Damascus and suddenly he is stopped in his tracks. Did Saul think he was seeing a vision like that of Ezekiel? No this was different as Saul hears a voice challenging him:

"*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* Imagine Saul's fear and astonishment, but he has the presence of mind to ask: "*Who are you Lord?*" To his amazement the voice says: "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting*". Saul is struck blind and has to let himself to be taken by the hand and led like a child to Damascus where for three days he could not see.

And what about the courage of the disciple Ananias who obeyed God's instruction to meet with Saul of Tarsus, despite what he had heard about Saul evil deeds? When Ananias meets Saul he refers to him as '*Brother Saul*' and tells them he has been sent by the Lord Jesus so that Saul might regain his sight.

So begins the ministry of Saul, who become known as Paul, proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah for whom the Jews had been waiting. What a transformation? Yes God does move in mysterious ways.

Tom Wright in his book: '*Acts for Everyone*' * writes:

"If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door of history swung open at last, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when

all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball and came hurtling through that open door and into the wide world beyond."

What vivid imagery. The Conversion of Saul gives us encouragement for today. We can get bowed down by all the news of destruction and evil that is in the world today. We can see no end to it. But the Conversion of Saul gives us hope for the future as we see a man carrying out evil deeds transformed into a disciple of Christ. There is hope that men and women following ISL or Boko Horan may turn from their deeds of evil and like Saul have a conversion experience, turn from evil, and work for the common good.

Had Saul began to have doubts about his mission as he journeyed to Damascus? Had the stoning of Stephen to death before Saul's very eyes changed his mind?

We do not know. All we know was that this 'Damascus Road' experience of Saul's was a turning point in his life as he came face to face with Jesus the Christ.

St Paul, spent his life undertaking many missionary journeys proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world. Paul who said he was not an eloquent speaker but nevertheless was used by God. He relied on God in his weakness and boasted of it writing to the Corinthians:

"...So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insult, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong..." (2 Cor. 12:9b to 10).

We can take heart from this that God often uses the most unlikely people in his service; we only have to look at the reluctance of many of the prophets to respond to God's call. The secret is that the prophets and the disciples including St Paul were empowered by the Holy Spirit. They did not rely on their own strength. The power of the Holy Spirit is available to us today.

Paul too had a living relationship with Jesus Christ and was empowered by him. We too in this service of Holy Communion are empowered as we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the bread and wine.

Paul in his ministry faced hardship, persecution, punishment, rejection and even shipwreck. He often had no fixed abode and had to rely on the hospitality of others. He knew what it was to be homeless. Paul would have sympathy with people today who have had to flee from their homes due to war or conflict, people who have lost their homes through redundancy or marriage breakdown or ill health. Paul was not only concerned with people's spiritual growth but with their physical well-being. Paul in his letters to the Church in Corinth and Galatia reminds them to take up collections to support their poorer brothers and sisters of his day. We are following that example

as we support the Night Shelter Project, Faith in Action and other Homelessness Charities.

We come to church to Worship God but then we are sent out to be the church in the world as we put our faith into action.

We give thanks too in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, where the theme this year is ***Salt of the Earth*** that we can join with Christians of other denominations to witness to Christ in the world.

St. Paul put his faith in Jesus the Christ as he tells the Christians in Corinth:

“For is God who said:

“Let light shine out of darkness” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of

Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor.4:6)

May we follow the example of St. Paul and shine as lights in the world reflecting the Glory of God to the people we meet each day. Amen.

* *‘Acts for Everyone – Part 1, – Tom Wright, SCPK.*

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