

A Conversion of Heart....

A homily for the conversion of Paul by the Revd Prof Hugh Houghton



Resurrection by Jen Norton

It seems very appropriate that I am preaching here today on the Feast of the Conversion of Paul, because, in my day job as an academic at the University of Birmingham, my long-term research project is to edit the Pauline Epistles. As the Apostle Paul can be a quite a divisive figure—he reveals a lot of himself in his letters, and sometimes says things which can bring us up short—when I tell people that I am editing Paul’s letters, they sometimes get excited and ask whether there’s a particular line I could cut out for them! But, perhaps fortunately, that’s not the sort of editing I do. Rather, it involves examining the surviving handwritten copies of Paul’s letters, because the originals were lost a long time ago, to try to work out what the earliest text would have been. Our new edition in Greek, taking account of all the manuscript discoveries over the last 100 years, will then serve as the basis for the next generation of modern translations and biblical scholarship. I’m going to come to St Margaret’s on 7th March and give an illustrated presentation of this work, so please do mark the date in your diary if you’d like to come and hear more about that.

This morning, however, I am going to consider the significance of this Feast of the Conversion of Paul, within the season of Epiphany. As you may be aware, ‘Epiphany’ means a showing, or a revelation, and is usually connected with the arrival of the

Magi in Bethlehem as the revelation of the infant Jesus to the nations. But we can all have epiphanies, moments of insight, and that's also what happened to Saul in his Road to Damascus experience. He realised that, all this time, he'd been wrong in his persecuting of Christians. Perhaps he finally saw that he was fighting a losing battle. Maybe he acknowledged that this was something bigger than him. Possibly there was some form of mystical experience, an awareness of the presence of God. After all, in his letter to the Galatians which we heard this morning, Paul wrote that he received "a revelation of Jesus Christ" and that "God, who ... called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me".

Whatever it was, this experience had an effect, resulting in the Conversion of Paul, his change of heart and of behaviour. There's a common misconception—which the Church may not do enough to dispel—that the conversion of Paul is a change of religion. Over centuries, this has been used, or rather misused, as an example of how Christianity replaces Judaism; those who, like Paul, "see the light" become Christians, and those who don't remain in darkness. There are two reasons why this is completely incorrect. The first is that it is historically inaccurate. At the time of Paul, there was no such thing as a separate religion called Christianity. All Jesus' followers, by and large, were Jews like Jesus himself. Their belief in Jesus was an aspect of their Judaism which marked them out, but did not constitute a separate set of beliefs: we learn from the Acts of the Apostles that they continued to worship in the Temple and observe Jewish practices in addition to gathering early on Sundays to remember the Last Supper, as Jesus told them to (and as we too are doing this morning).

The second proof that Paul's conversion is not from Judaism to Christianity is that he himself, in numerous passages of his letters, emphasises that he is still a Jew—and not just any Jew: as he tells the Philippians, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" [Phil. 3:4–6]. Even after his Road to Damascus experience, Paul continues to think of himself as a Jew, while trying to find a way of explaining what had happened to him. And this is clear too in his letter to the Romans: "Has God rejected his people? By no means! I

myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." [Rom. 11:1–2].

So what we are celebrating today is not a change of religion, from one system to another, with all the disruption and emotional upheaval that can bring. It's not about tribalism (who you identify with, who your people are). Instead, it's something different. The Conversion of Paul is a change of heart, and a change of heart which comes through an experience of the presence of God. In that respect, it is significant that this Feast occurs not just in Epiphany but also, each year, marks the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We pray for the unity of the Church following the example which Jesus set us, as in the Gospel according to John: "May they all be one, Father, ... as we are one." [John 17:21–22].

Yet it can be tempting to think of Christian Unity as everyone else becoming like us. If that is the case, we may need to turn again to Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he tells his readers that "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." [Gal.3:27–28]. Not "all of you are the *same*", but "all of you are *one*". Unity is to be found in difference; not in ignoring it or downplaying it, but in accepting that, while each of us is unique, what we share is even stronger than the ways in which we differ.

So maybe the church unity for which we have been praying is in coming to see and understand who we ourselves are, and what we have in common with our fellow Christians. We should not be seeking to change anyone's religion. Rather, maybe it is a change of heart, a conversion like that of Paul, which could suggest to *us* that *we* need to do things differently. It can be a challenge to accept other people on their own terms, or perhaps more accurately, on God's terms, in order to recognise what it is that we share, and how God can work through us. But the end of Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers is that "they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" [John 17:23].

And that brings us back to Epiphany, the showing of Christ to the nations. It is the unity of the Church, Jesus says, through which “the world may know that you have sent me”. What we have to share is our experience of God, the encounters which lead to a change of heart, to a conversion like that of Paul, enabling us to become the people that God calls us to be. That might seem like a tall order, but in Paul’s own words, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.” [1Thess 5:24]. So let us pray that we may find that unity, in order to make known to the world the one who loves us, forgives us, and calls us each by name, to his eternal glory, our Lord and God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.