

**Feast of the Conversion of St Paul**  
**Last day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**  
**(Acts 9:1-9)**  
**25.01.2014**

The first few chapters of the book of Acts tell us how a little band of disciples, quickly became a movement after the death and resurrection of their radical leader, Jesus of Nazareth. The list of new disciples included: Samaritans, Hellenistic Gentiles, a businesswoman named Lydia and her slaves and employees, an Ethiopian eunuch, a Roman Centurion and of course, a bit later a man called Saul, enemy of the followers of Jesus – and that is just for starters.

Before his conversion, Saul believed that these followers of Jesus had got it wrong and needed to be taught a lesson. Their belief in a Messiah represented the total breakdown of a very carefully constructed religious identity. Jews were supposed to be Jews, and Samaritans were supposed to Samaritans, and Romans were supposed to be Romans; suddenly anyone could worship the God of the Jews, through this so-called Messiah? Worshipping the God of Israel was supposed to be a members-only kind of thing, but this new movement seemed to let anyone join. No wonder Saul was so dead set against it.

But then as he's travelling to Damascus, with instructions to eliminate this rabble of Jesus followers he encounters this man Jesus. "Saul, Saul", Jesus says, "why are you persecuting me?" Notice Jesus' words: why are you persecuting me? Jesus makes the point that when you hurt my people, Saul, you hurt me for they are in me, and I am in them.

This is a light bulb moment for Saul, something is about to change. Suddenly Saul finds himself in the company of this Jesus that everyone is talking about – but he's supposed to be dead. Saul begins to change his mind about Jesus and soon forgets the reason why he was on the road to Damascus. In a flash literally Saul goes from believing in the narrow exclusivity of God's worshipping family, based on ethnic and cultural background; to insisting on the radical openness of God's family, that all have been brought near in Christ. In fact, this becomes his core message.

So profound was Paul's change of heart that he would later write in his letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus." That is one of the most radically inclusive statements in the entire Bible, and it was written by the same man who was once obsessed with who was in and who was out.

The new church's willingness to welcome everyone who knocked on its doors must have come as a shock to Paul. He learned the hard way on the road to Damascus that the community of God is for everyone, not just for insiders; and that in Jesus Christ outside and inside have been made one. He told the Ephesians that in Jesus the dividing walls are tumbled. In Jesus Christ, the doors to God's household were flung wide open and everyone is welcome.

As you can imagine relationships would have been strained from time to time in this new community. This mixture of Jews, Greeks, Romans, Samaritans, women, slaves and free, rich and poor; all sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds and traditions; there's bound to have been tensions. One of the first things the early church would have had to do was to learn to love one another with the love of Christ, week by week and day by day.

That's why Paul would write so many letters to the early churches: because again and again and again he had to remind them that love for God and love for one another was a central plank of their faith. All of us are made one in Jesus Christ. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are marked out by

our love for one another, not just put up with one another; not just co-exist with a minimum of grumbling; not just tolerate one another, but love one another, just as Christ has loved us; for by our love, and only by our love, will others know that we are part of God's family.

So the first thing we discover about Paul's conversion is that it is personal. The risen Lord Jesus Christ met with Paul personally. You and I can have exactly the same experience – maybe not in such dramatic terms but Jesus comes and meets with us in the ordinariness of our lives and invites us to follow him.

This brings me to the second part of Paul's story, and that is Paul's willingness to be changed: changed, firstly by his encounter with the living Christ and secondly, by his new community of Jesus' followers. Before his conversion, no one was surer of his own opinions than Paul. He was a headstrong, passionate man; a fierce debater and a ruthless opponent. He was so sure he had all the right answers and he was ready to impose his ideas on others. He was not only persuasive, but he was a violent man. He hated with a passion the enemies of the state and was ready to persecute his fellow Jews because of their beliefs.

It takes a lot for a zealous and stubborn man like Paul to see the error of his ways and allow his opinions and ideas to be changed. In fact, it took an appearance of Christ himself, speaking right into his life: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I will say this about Paul: over the course of his three-day experience, he completely changes, inside and out. Paul submits to being transformed and made new by the Lord Jesus. He lets God happen to him. The man who sets out from Jerusalem is not the same man who arrives in Damascus.

And when the scales fall from his eyes he not only sees again, he sees differently. His perspective has been changed. His ideas, his positions, his theology, his heart, his life, his mind, his attitude: nothing about Paul has been left unchanged by his encounter with the living Christ. That's why he gets a new name: a new name, for a new man. As Paul himself will say in 2 Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

And I suppose the challenge for us here this morning is: are we willing to allow God to change us? Are we ready to let God transform our lives from the inside out? Will we be changed? Are we ready to learn from one another with humility and openness? Will we be changed? Are we willing to allow our hearts to be opened by Holy Spirit so that we can be changed to our core and made like Christ? I don't know about you, but I want that, I want to be changed!

Paul's story fills me with tremendous hope that bit by bit, the scales are falling from our eyes, too. Bit by bit and day by day we are moving forward into God's blinding light and being transformed by it. As Paul says elsewhere in Romans, we should "fare forward in a life entirely new" (Rom 6:3-4). As the Church of Jesus Christ we are faring forward into a life entirely new!

This brings me to the final aspect of this story, and that is that Paul's conversion is a conversion into community. Paul was a solitary individual on his way to excise the rebellious Christians. Notwithstanding Jesus' intervention that day, I want to suggest to you that Paul's conversion could never have happened without the community of Jesus' disciples in Damascus. Read the story and you'll see that after his dramatic encounter with the Lord Jesus he's left on his own blinded, confused, vulnerable, and terror-struck, while Jesus speaks to Ananias telling him to "go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus ... " (Acts 9:10-18) Ananias reluctantly does as he is told and he finds Saul where God said he was and when Ananias laid hands on Saul his eyes were opened and he could see. In this experience Paul encountered the love and mercy of God as Ananias and the other disciples offered him love and forgiveness.

The Bible makes it very clear that God is a missionary God. Bishop Graham Cray Anglican Bishop for Fresh Expressions the Church of England and Methodist initiative in the UK, once said that it's not so much the church of God that has a mission but the God of mission who has a church. You and I are invited to partner God in his mission to a lost and broken world – that's part of God's plan for his church – you and me. Jesus' sum of the 10 Commandments is love God and love neighbour. Ananias gives us enormous hope because he did exactly what God asked of him.

Jesus involved this little community of followers to be part of his purpose for Paul's life that would extend the boundaries of the early church into the known world. God uses this little community to minister grace and mercy to Paul, to restore his sight, to feed and nourish him, to teach him the faith and to anoint him for his mission to preach the Gospel to the nations. The brothers and sisters in Damascus embody forgiveness and reconciliation as they dare to welcome and bless their former enemy. This community of followers of Jesus help make Paul the great evangelist of the good news and missionary to the gentiles. It is God who kick-starts Paul's conversion and call, but it is the community of faith who affirms it and makes it real.

Paul's conversion was personal, Paul's conversion changed him and Paul's conversion involved other disciples. We may not have had the drama of a dramatic vision of Jesus as we have journeyed through life, but that's not to say we haven't encountered the living God. I know what it's like to be changed. I can remember a time when I could have judged for Ireland, I was so narrow it was painful. But in the grace and mercy of God the scales fell from my eyes as I learned to appreciate as the hymn writer puts it: "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. There is kindness in his justice which is more than liberty". As I have allowed the Spirit of God to break me, melt me, mould me, fill me, I have learned how radically inclusive God is, and how all encompassing his love is; and how accepting, welcoming and loving he is. And I, too, have had the experience of being taught the essential nature of God's community, and how instructive it is and I have learned humility from other disciples, and of being profoundly and deeply changed by God and by his people.

This is the real challenge of Paul's conversion, for it proves beyond a shadow of doubt that God is interested in you and me. It proves beyond doubt that God has plans for you and me that are for our good and will not harm us. The big question will be how willing are we to allow God to come that close? Amen.

Let us pray: God of new beginnings, we ask you to meet us on our journeys. Interrupt our lives with the light of your living truth. Teach us to bear witness to the inclusiveness of your family and transform us from individuals to community. And make us ready to be changed. Amen