

Conversion of St. Paul
Acts 26.9-23/Galatians 1.11-24/Matthew 10.16-22
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
25 January 2009

~Paul H. Friesen~

Everyone loves a good conversion story—and why not?

There's nothing more heart-warming than the tale of a monster of a man addicted to violence, or alcohol, or sex, or dedicated to crushing lesser mortals who 'gets religion' and then lives a chaste, and charitable and happy life.

Yes, on the whole, we love converts. But according to the media we apparently also love to be horrified by the stories of people who seem religious and upright but get caught out, who fall from grace as their betrayals and addictions are revealed.

Conversion is a fickle business, and so many of us have learned to become cautious of dramatic reversals of all kinds, even of those most apparently sincere and religious. And yet here we are, celebrating the Conversion of St. Paul.

Perhaps you know that after certain bishops and theologians and kings were excommunicated by the Popes of the 1520, 30s and 40s, Anglicans went ahead and reformed the worship of England. They simplified the medieval mass and so created the first Anglican Prayer Book.

And in doing this they left out many of the centuries of accumulated Saints. But from their beginning Anglicans never neglected the annual celebration of the *Conversion of St. Paul* on today's date, the 25th of January.

And after all, here we are sitting in the oldest Anglican Church in Canada; its congregation founded in 1749, its building built in 1750, and its name, St. Paul's, given in 1759. So in one way, this year, 2009, marks the 250th anniversary of *St. Paul's Church*.

But it is the conversion of the apostle himself the church celebrates. St. Paul, in the providence of God, was the single most significant leader of the first generation of the church. And we are invited, as he apostle put it a number of times quite boldly, to become 'imitators of Christ, by means of imitating him'.¹ So his conversion to Christ is a model for us.

Although I've never met him, I have recently become familiar with the story of a young boy named Jonathan in our city. He too often seems bored and won't

¹ The precise expression varies, but the meaning is similar: *I Corinthians* 4.16 and 11.1, *Philippians* 3.17.

engage in play with the other three-year old children in his preschool, but instead sits in the corner...reading a book! He doesn't turn four till October, and he's been reading for some months already.

Now what are the rest of us supposed to do with this story of a one-in-a-million child? Feel badly that our children weren't geniuses, but really only learned to read in school?

Push our children to be like Jonathan?

Or praise Jonathan for a gift that was given him by God, without him or anyone asking for it? Or pity Jonathan for being stuck with a gift that will bring him special sorrows as well as special joys as he grows up?

Perhaps what we should do instead is do what his parents did, and see him as any other child in their care, each of them unique, each of them needing the warmest, most appropriate community, at home and school, in which to grow up with whatever gifts God has given them. And to discover what sacrifices are needed to make this possible.

Maybe our problem with St. Paul, and in fact all the great saints, is the same as our problem with little Jonathan. What on earth are we supposed to do with such an unusual Apostle, with such a dramatic story, so removed from our experience, so beyond our possibilities?

We certainly aren't meant to think that any other kind of conversion than St. Paul's is wrong, or even second-class.

We certainly are meant to see Paul and all the saints as those who can show us the way to Jesus Christ, and to see that conversion to Christ is worth so much more than what we are converted from. We're offered this in three ways.

The very first thing the Apostle offers us for our own conversion to Christ is his example of honesty.

In his trial before King Agrippa, recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles* we have heard St. Paul's own speech describe his conversion—but not from crime and substance abuse!

The Apostle was converted from a life of religious zeal and pillar-of-the-community respectability. If the pre-conversion Paul were around today, I have no doubt that (like many of us) he would be paying his taxes, going to worship, drinking fairly-traded coffee, and sitting on the boards of charities.

It's not that he would have stopped these sorts of things, or that we should. Yet the historic Paul realized his conversion took him far closer to God and made him far more helpful to others than these sorts of commitments could ever do all by themselves.

Saul of Tarsus, as Paul was known before his conversion knew he was sincere, but admitted he was sincerely wrong.

In his letter to the Philippians, the church at Philippi, Paul said, ‘If anyone has reason to be confident, 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; as the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.’²

Only one of these things did he, or could he, drop—persecuting the church, destroying what was good in fits of self-righteousness. It was the sign that something was quite wrong in his life. And he honestly admitted it in the midst of his conversion—and it completely changed the mood of his commendable religious commitments.

To King Agrippa he says: ‘I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth...I locked up many of the saints in prison...I also cast my vote against them...I tried to force them to blaspheme...I was furiously enraged at them...I pursued them.’

And during his conversion he honestly admitted that he was wrong. He had been self-righteous, so much so, that he destroyed all kinds of things in his sincere religious zeal. In fact the Apostle admitted he needed conversion more than once. ‘The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,’ he said to his apprentice, Timothy, ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.’³

And all of us need those moments of conversion offered to us as we confess our sins at worship, and observe the season of Lent, and say our daily prayers. And we’re offered these moments daily as we reflect that what we have said or done is untrue, or has injured someone for no good cause. Christians believe far too much in conversion to limit it to once in a lifetime.

The very first thing the Apostle offers us for our own conversion to Christ is his example of honesty—especially when we have been feeling self-righteous, as if the church or the world owes us something for our good behaviour, while we have actually been wrecking some of the precious things around us.

Honesty is especially important and seems especially difficult for those bigger moments of conversion we all have, which takes us to the next thing.

The second thing the Apostle offers us for our own conversion to Christ is his example of talking to God in the midst of our conversion crisis.

² *Philippians* 3.4-7. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

³ *I Timothy* 1.15

Paul was going about his business, when he saw the light, the light that was so bright it hurt, and hurt so much it blinded his eyes for awhile even as it gave sight to his soul.

What happened to him, happens to us all, as he put it: ‘When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.”’

It hurts to be blinded by the truth, and to stumble and fall to the ground. But as surely as the Lord God spoke to the Apostle in his own language, the Lord God will speak to us in our moment of crisis, if we will hear his voice.

If you’re like me its very easy to see these moments of crisis not as opportunities for conversion, but as tragedies, and to look for someone to blame, and to complain that we deserve better—to talk to everyone and to anyone but God who is after all ready to take the blame for being in charge of the universe.

But Paul chooses to be converted at the sound of God’s voice, translated for us in four simple English words: ‘Who are you, Lord?’

I have long thought this very odd. God has struck him down, and then speaks from heaven while Paul lies face down. Who else could it possible be but God? What was Paul thinking? But in the end, it really does make sense.

He needed to ask ‘who God was’ for conversion to even begin, because all of us invest a lot in pretending we can’t hear God in our crisis, and we need to ask because we actually might have closed our ears to God and are puzzled or angered when God speaks.

God always has a word for us—we can’t always answer why, exactly, a crisis has overtaken us. But we can know that God is always somewhere in it for us, waiting for us to speak with him, rather than urging us to look around for something or someone to blame. Paul thought he knew God so well, but until he really heard God’s voice in Jesus Christ, he needed converting.

That’s why we practice talking and listening to God in worship every Sunday—so that when we land in a crisis of our own making, or in a crisis out of the blue, or in any crisis in between, we have landed already practiced in the spiritual habit of conversation with God in each other’s company.

We always have a divine choice offered us in any crisis, as St. Paul did—to ask God how Jesus Christ is speaking to us through his own life and death and resurrection, or to ignore him and write angry letter to the public works director on whose road we have fallen down.

We learn from St. Paul to be honest about our sin, and to hear God’s voice in our conversion crisis.

The third and final thing the Apostle offers us for our own conversion to Christ is his example of letting God change us through Christ.

What did St. Paul say to the church in Galatia—what was the word on the street about his conversion? ‘They only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.”’

What an amazing thing to find on a memorial stone in a cemetery. What an amazing thing to find people saying: that woman, that man, that boy, that girl that used to wreck things (with direct attacks, or by sneaky words and deeds) is now proclaiming the faith.

We don’t have to be speakers or preachers or writers to let God proclaim through us the good news of Jesus Christ. And the good news is simply that God loves everything and everyone that God made. And the good news is simply that through Jesus Christ, God has redeemed us, has adopted us back after we have spurned his family name, has offered us a chance, again, to be converted.

It is divine grace that will change us, if only we will be honest, and hear God’s voice, and let ourselves be changed by Christ in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, by Christ in the other members of this community of faith, by his voice in everyone of the tragedies or crises we make or we encounter. *Thanks be to God for the conversion of St. Paul—thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who converts us.*