

Sunday 25 January – Conversion of St. Paul

Sermon by Liz Barnes

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Today is the day on which the Church celebrates the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus – that moment of blinding light, a voice from God, temporary blindness, and a rapid turning around of Paul's life. And, what a turning around, from the man who not only stood by and watched Stephen, the first martyr, being put to death, but who looked after the coats of the mob while they stoned him to death; from the one who persecuted all Christians with a hateful passion, to the man who ultimately did more than anyone to spread the news of Christ and the Christian religion throughout the world.

Conversion for Paul, as it is for any of us, is not a revelation without responsibility. It is not the end of the story, but the beginning. It may well have the feeling of bursting through from darkness into marvellous light, but it does not mean we can then just bask in the sunlight. The light shows us what we were missing before. The light shows us what needs to be done. In the dark we do not see, or recognise the tasks and possibilities ahead, but now that they are shown up in brilliant light it is our responsibility to act, as was it Paul's.

Paul's post-conversion life involved him being baptised, retiring to Arabia for three years of prayer and solitude before returning to Damascus. There his Jewish enemies were so hostile that he escaped by night, lowered in a basket over the city wall. He went to Jerusalem where he was received with some hesitation until Barnabas quelled the doubts of the community.

Some years later he worked in Antioch and the vicinity. Missionary journeys followed, first to Cyprus, then to Asia Minor and then to eastern Greece, lastly to Ephesus before returning to Jerusalem where he was attacked and beaten by a mob for preaching against the enactments of the Jewish Law.

Furthermore, Paul was an outsider to the tight little knot of apostles. He was a Jew himself, but he was also a Roman citizen. He was much misunderstood. He believed that, like Jesus, he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it, and so in his travels he would always start by going to

the local synagogue to explain his mission. His life was in danger from religious extremists, and he invoked his privileges as a Roman citizen to be tried by Caesar in Rome – and what happens on his way to Rome, he becomes shipwrecked at Malta and bitten by a viper. It does all call to mind that old lament, God, if you do this to your friends, I'd hate to see what you do to your enemies. But, because of his conversion, because of his realisation he must continue to work and, indeed, fight for Christ – there is no going back, this is it.

Paul travelled everywhere he could and is known as the apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews). As Paul discovered, it is only the start of a much greater and even more remarkable journey which lasts our whole life and beyond.

In his writings to the first Christian communities, which we read Sunday by Sunday we find Paul's first beliefs being expanded and developed for us, in his teaching and guidance to those first churches. For me I have always thought of Paul as a radical theologian who opened hearts and minds to the gospel by his passion and conviction, he did what God needed him to do with obedience and joy – and we could do worse than emulating that.

The great strength of Paul came from his encounter with Jesus Christ not merely on the road to Damascus but every time he, with the early Church, "took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" The same Lord who met him at the city gates of that Syrian capital comes here to meet us this morning!

Like Paul our Christian life is a journey towards God through Christ. It is a journey of unravelling the mysteries for ourselves, and at our own pace. No one can do it for us, it is up to us, in prayer, reading, contemplation, reflection, discussion, action, deeds and, indeed, our very being to move on towards a stronger and yet closer relationship with Christ. It is a journey which does not provide us with all the answers but does equip us to understand more clearly and accept God's will, God's mystery.

And finally, there is a small detail in the account of the Conversion of St Paul's which is sometimes overlooked and that is the role of Ananias, which is not only significant but pivotal too. Ananias had a key role to play

as an instrument of God's grace and the means of imparting the Holy Spirit upon Saul; before this he was sceptical. We learn from Ananias, that there is no harm to express doubt, to be sceptical, to ask questions, because this is often how our faith grows. We also see in Ananias that there is a need to act upon God's prompting.

As we reflect on St Paul, let us remember too the role Ananias played in Paul's conversion – God may well use us to prompt others to respond to his call. Might this be something that God might be prompting you to do, to become Ananias to one of your friends or acquaintances?

Amen