

Sermon for Holy Trinity on Sunday 25 January 2026 – The Conversion of Paul

Texts: Acts.9.1-22; Jeremiah 1.4-11; Matthew 19.27

The Conversion of Paul

Today we are celebrating one of the most significant events in the history of Christianity and the early church. For the conversion of Paul was epic because through his subsequent ministry as an apostle, he was instrumental in helping spread the gospel in Asia Minor and parts of Europe. He also enabled the growth and development of fledgling Christian communities as well as laying the foundations of Christian theology from which much of the later doctrines of the Church would develop. His dramatic conversion also revealed the power of God at work, calling someone who had persecuted Christians and been responsible in some cases, for their deaths, to become one of the leading witnesses and advocates for Christ.

But there is a danger and one to which the Church has certainly succumbed at various times, that his conversion has set a model against all Christian experiences of conversion should be judged. By 'conversion' in this context, I mean our conscious decision to turn to and accept Christ into our lives in response to His call. It has led in some cases, to an expectation that all Christian conversions should be sudden, dramatic and with immediate change. This has been unhelpful because it has given the impression that those who experience more gradual conversion experiences have not had an authentic conversion. But it has also put the spotlight on the issue of *the length of time of the conversion*, rather than thinking about the fundamental issues which conversion to Christ involves.

So today, I would like us to think of these different aspects of conversion as we see them in the conversion of Paul and then explore the implications of that for us within our own individual journeys of faith.

Let's begin then with St Paul himself. Saul, as he is known when we are first introduced to him in the Bible, is a Jew from Tarsus, a thriving town in the NE of what is now Turkey, famous for its philosophers and academic and religious debate. He is a Pharisee, one of the strictest groups of Jews for observing the Torah. He is also highly educated, receiving instruction from the famous Pharisee teacher, Gamaliel.

Saul is highly driven in his faith believing that the coming of God's Messiah was immanent and that the Messiah would bring radical hope and renewal to his people. He believed the Messiah would do this by overthrowing corrupt political powers who held his people in servitude, bringing God's kingdom on earth and God would once more be present in His holy Temple. But in preparation for this, it was vital for people to get ready, to repent and turn to God. In this context, the presence of those who claimed to believe in Christ as Messiah were anathema – their existence could inhibit the coming of the true Messiah. It was for that reason that Paul and others were so concerned to root them out.

Saul was what we would probably describe as a zealot, who was filled with zeal; for God and ruthless in putting that zeal into practice. That's why he had gathered

letters from the High Priest in Jerusalem, giving him authority to work with the Synagogue in Damascus to identify those who claimed to be believers in Christ, and to bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem to face imprisonment, torture and in some cases, death.

And it is whilst Saul is heading towards Damascus with this end in mind and perhaps caught up in prayer that God would help in this task, that he experiences his dramatic conversion. He sees light from heaven flashing round him, falls from his horse to the ground and hears the voice asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He then experiences the extraordinary revelation that Jesus, whom he has been persecuting is none other than God's own son and the Messiah. Therefore, Saul has in fact been persecuting the one for whom his soul most longed.

Saul is traumatised as well as temporarily blinded. He is led to Damascus where he spends three days fasting and in prayer, until the disciple Ananias is sent by God to greet him, restore his sight and to baptise him. From that point on, Saul proclaims Jesus as the Messiah in the synagogues in Damascus before returning to his home city of Tarsus. It is from there, quite a few years later, that Saul, who is now known as Paul, will begin his missionary journeys which will bring the gospel to the Gentile and ultimately lead him to Rome and his martyrdom for Christ.

Conversion was to become a key theme in Paul's preaching – he proclaimed that as we turn to the Lord, the veil lying over our mind is removed and we are able to see the reflected glory of God. This in turn helps us to be transformed from one degree of glory to another and to devote our lives in service to God. It's worth remembering also that Jesus called for life-transforming change in all who would be his disciples. He said, "If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9.23-24).

So let's turn our attention now to what conversion means for us if we intend to be faithful followers of Christ.

First of all, conversion is vital in our journey of faith. However we have experienced or are currently experiencing the call of God to us in our lives, we are asked to make the conscious commitment to turn to Christ. This is one of the fundamental questions which the priest asks at our Baptism, "Do you turn to Christ?", to which either the candidate themselves or, if they are a child, their parents and godparents respond on their behalf, "I turn to Christ".

This 'turning to Christ' involves a fundamental reorientation of how we see ourselves and where we put our focus and our trust. This is expressed in the Baptism service in the imagery of us dying with Christ, as the waters of Baptism are poured upon us and rising to new life in Him. When Saul, temporarily blinded after his conversion experience, spent three days in Damascus in prayer and fasting, we can see that a similar process is beginning to take place within him. The old Saul is being transformed as he is called by the Holy Spirit to his new identity and life in Christ.

Part of this reorientation is about beginning to see the world in a new way, having a new vision. with what St Paul was to call 'The mind of Christ'. In St Paul's case it was

about realising that God's grace and salvation were not just for the Jews but for all people as he expresses it so powerfully in his letter to the Galatians:

'There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.28).

An essential part of our process of conversion is our prayer. We need to be rooted to God each day in prayer so we too may be open to where He is calling us to be and act in the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember the encounter between Ananias, the reluctant yet faithful disciple who comes to seek out Saul so he may lay hands on him and he may receive the Holy Spirit. Anania is only able to do this and Saul to accept his presence because both are rooted to God in prayer.

Conversion is also always linked to commissioning. In our Old Testament lesson today, we heard how the young boy, Jeremiah, was called by God, even as a child in the womb, and commissioned by God to serve as a prophet for God's people. Jesus called his disciples to a radical transformation of life and then commissioning them to go out and tell people about the forthcoming Kingdom of God. St Paul speaks of this too in relation to his own conversion experience when he writes of how Christ, whom he hears as a voice from heaven says to him as he lies on the ground:

'But now get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to those things in which you have seen me and in which I will appear to you' (Acts 26.16).

There is an important lesson for us. That is that our conversion, our turning to God in response to His call, is not just about ourselves but is about how God is commissioning us to witness to Him, to his love, truth and justice and to become channels of His love in the world in our daily lives.

Our conversion from glory to glory will not be easy. As the risen Christ calls Saul to his service, he warns him of this, saying, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14, 9:5). A goad was a kind of stick used to prod cattle to keep them moving forwards. At times, the old us, the us, that longs to live for ourselves alone, to resist God and instead to be selfish and self-sufficient, will stir up in us. We are all human and all have weaknesses to which we will from time to time succumb. But the key thing is for us to keep our eyes on our goal which is Christ. As St Paul testified from the depths of his conversion experience and all the hardships and suffering he then endured in his subsequent ministry as an apostle of Christ, he knew that it had all been worth it. And the reason why it had all been worth it was because he had found Christ, who is the pearl of great price; the one who gave Paul and gives us ultimate joy and purpose.

Finally. our process of conversion is life-long and this is true whether our initial experience of our conversion was sudden or more gradual. Our conversion and our belief in Christ has to affect all the areas of our lives, not just those we keep for display on Sundays. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that a lot of what is going on inside us and in our lives is not yet Christ-like. We have to be open to the promptings of God's grace, nudging us to change; to be open to say "Yes" to Him when he calls us in the path that leads us to Christ. But we can persist in the faith

and hope that we are in gradual process of becoming more like the One for who our souls long, Jesus Christ.

'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!' (2 Corinthians 5.17).

Amen

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