

Conversion of St Paul

25 January, 2017

Readings: Acts 9:1-22, Matthew 19:27-30

Complete turnaround...
Growing in discipleship

On this Conversion-of-St-Paul day help us to have the courage that he did to turn our lives around. In Jesus name. Amen.

I really admire people who are open to change and to seeing things in a new way. I remember a man in my Timaru congregation who did just that: John Wilkie. John in his 80's did an Alpha course and it changed his life. "I don't have much time left," he said, "but I have found direction and meaning, and I will make every moment count." He became an enthusiast for Jesus. He would encourage everyone to find out about Jesus. It took 80 plus years of preparation but John finally had a living relationship with Jesus.

Today the church not just here but across the world honours the conversion of St Paul. His turning around was very dramatic, as we will see.

Paul is important because no one did more to bring the gospel to the wider world. Paul began his life as the son of free born Jewish father and was a Roman citizen. Born in Tarsus he grew up in Jerusalem and was educated by the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. He was trained in the laws of Judaism and lived according to the strict sect of the Pharisees. He displayed outstanding zeal. Eventually this zeal led him to believe it was his duty to oppose the freshly growing Christian faith. Within Jerusalem he imprisoned many Christians and several times cast his vote for their death. He was even there watching on as Stephen, the first Deacon, was stoned to death.

Saul's zeal took him beyond Jerusalem, tracking down Christians in other synagogues. It was while on the trail of several Christians that his dramatic conversion took place. He carried with him letters from the High Priest in Jerusalem to search and destroy any Christian missionaries. He had with him a support posse. Nearing Damascus a blinding light brought him up short. "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me," the voice said. Saul was ordered by the voice to go to Damascus where he would be told further what to do.

In Damascus he was befriended by Ananias. Ananias was a Christian who ministered to Saul by praying for his sight to return, (he had been blinded by the vision) and introducing him to the Christian way. Christians were called 'Followers of The Way'.

From the moment his sight returned Saul began to preach openly in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God, the long awaited Christ.

Later to reflect his new found faith, he changed his name to Paul, and became the most outstanding missionary, apostle, writer, teacher and theologian of the early church.

It was a complete conversion, a complete turning around. But we can see several things that prepared him for this moment. There must have remained in him a respect for the fearlessness of the Christians he had put to death. Deep in his soul there must have been a growing suspicion that God's grace was wider than just for the people of Israel. Also he would have heard the stories circulating of Jesus life death and resurrection. The super zealous Pharisee became the super passionate Christian.

Much is made of Paul but I really admire Ananias. Here before him was the enemy of his faith who had been blinded. He was a man at whose hands many Christians had died, and yet Ananias ministered to him. A lesser man, would have said, "Good. You have been blinded. On your bike." It reminds me of the prison guard watching over the German Christian and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the concentration camp who asked him to pray for him. "Pray for you, you have got to be joking." Where do we find the grace to pray for enemies? Only from God.

In a couple of days Paul went through the stages of discipleship that often, if not usually, take many years. We can see the first stage of discipleship in the Gospel: *come and follow me*. But there is much more to it than just following. Rick Warren the writer of '40 Days of Purpose' uses the metaphor of the baseball diamond. I'm sorry about this because baseball isn't very Anglican. Everyone with something to do and all poised for action. Cricket is more Anglican. Anyway back to baseball or softball if you prefer. First base discipleship is being committed to membership. "Yep, I'm a member of the church." Warren calls this the process of knowing Christ. This is first base or discipleship 101. Second comes second base. This is discipleship 201, *committed to maturity*, the process of growing in Christ. "Yep, I'm a member and I want to know more, I know I have lots to learn." Third base or discipleship 301 is *committed to ministry*. It took the original disciples a long time to get to this point, about a year in the Gospels. This is where we say, "I want to serve Christ. I want to do things for other people in the name of Christ." And there are lots of examples of this happening around here. Mainly Music is a good example. Remember, ministry isn't just what the clergy do. Finally we get to the home plate; the crowd is on its feet, and cheering us on. This is where we are *committed to mission*, the process of sharing Christ. This is where the disciples become Apostles, going out and sharing

the good news with others. John Wilkie did this. "This Jesus," he said, "has changed my life for the better. Come and see for yourself."

In his classic book 'The Training of the Twelve', A.B Bruce wrote in 1871 that Jesus took the disciples through a process that infused them with the qualities of bearers of the Gospel. He saw four stages: "Come and see," the gospel 2 weeks ago, last week's reading, "come and follow," this weeks reading, "come and be with me." Finally "abide in me."

On this his conversion day the last word needs to be Paul's: Ephesians 4:13 "Our goal is to be mature Christians reaching unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Nick Mountfort