

“The Conversion Paradox”  
+ Conversion of St. Paul +  
January 25, 2015

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for the Conversion of St. Paul are the lessons that were just read.

If you want to look at qualifications for the job of Apostle Saul of Tarsus, also known as Paul, had an impressive resume’. In the book of Acts we learn that he was born at Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 21:39), of a father who was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:26-28; cf. 16:37), in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy Paul informs us that in his family piety was hereditary (2 Timothy 1:3). He told the Philippians his family followed the observances and traditions of the Pharisees. Sent as a young man to live in Jerusalem for his schooling under the famous teacher Gamaliel – the rabbi/teacher who began the use of parables for teaching and who, upon hearing the parables of Jesus, was thoroughly impressed Paul would have to rank as the most educated of all the Apostles – thoroughly versed and able to read the ancient texts of Israel as well knowledgeable regarding the commentaries and commentators on Holy Writ.

His double name Saul/Paul is easy to explain. Our Apostle was from the tribe of Benjamin – the same tribe as King Saul, 1<sup>st</sup> King of Israel. Being the son of a Roman citizen he would also have a Roman name: Paul. Having two names was very common and Saulos/Paulos has the rhyming ring that was often used. In the Roman world no one wanted to be called Saulos – its Greek meaning is “sultry walker” (It’s all about the bass...). A quadrilingual lad being fluent in Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin and Greek he would be able to go throughout the ancient world with ease – especially as a Roman citizen. Greek was the language of trade and his father had taught him a trade – tent making – well, actually, how to make the mohair of which tents were made – and he knew how to sew.

Those are wonderful qualities but the real negative appears when the robes of the murderers of Stephen lay their robes at Paul’s feet. He was their leader. His great intent was to wipe out/erase this new band of believers – the followers of Jesus of Nazareth who were known as “The Way.” He murdered Christians – plotted to kill them. His conversion, which we celebrate today, is a paradox. I have met murderers who are Christian – happens when you do ministry in a jail. I have never met someone who was a terrorist attacking and killing Christians

who then became a believer, by God's grace, perhaps someday I will. God wills that ALL should be saved. We dare not pick and choose.

We see in the conversion of Paul that with God all things are possible. The enemy becomes the friend, the opponent an ally, the apostate the apostle. After his conversion, blinded by the light of the vision that had taken him into heaven, Ananias, to whom he was taken for baptism had a very hard time believing such a radical change could take place in a murderous terrorist. Years later Paul, himself, wrote to the Ephesians, Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ...

Mightily and gloriously God used Paul in the work of God's Kingdom making known the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the Empire, perhaps as far as Spain, and using the pen in Paul's hand and the keen mind of a theologian and scholar to write God's Word – enabling all the generations to follow in the faith able to understand that salvation comes by grace, through faith and that, itself, a gift from God. (Eph. 2:8&9). The clarity with which he explained to the Roman Christians what happens in the mystery of baptism is our sure and certain hope throughout life and into eternity, Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. *Romans 6:3&4*

As predicted in the Gospel for this day he suffered and was persecuted for his faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Shipwrecked, pelted with rocks and stones and left for dead, three times receiving the 39 lashes, imprisoned – a traveling companion that not everyone who could get along with, afflicted with a physical ailment or deformity, a fiery debater, a mentoring father-figure to young Timothy, convicted traitor to the Roman Empire executed outside the city walls of Rome because he was a citizen - Paul is a puzzling saint - full of seeming contradictions – but, then again, aren't we all? Are we not, as Luther would have said in Latin, *Simil Justus et Pecator* (at the same time justified and sinful)?

Paul's conversion is the prototype of your conversion and mine. The very thought that any sinner can become a saint, that the Holy Spirit enters into human hearts, whether as infants or adults, and creates faith is paradoxical and miraculous. How do we begin to comprehend what God has done for us – as Paul wrote to the Galatians,

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3.27-29

All people need to be converted – none of us is righteous, no, not one, until we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, earned by His innocent suffering and death. Life-long Christians do you ever think of yourself as converts? All of us are. None of us would choose, on our own, to follow Jesus. Luther says, "I know that I cannot by my own reason or strength come to Jesus Christ but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel."

Ok – wonderful theology – and a short but adequate summary of Paul's conversion and work but how does your conversion or mine continue to show itself in our lives? Does Paul's work as an Apostle – the miracles – do they mean anything more to us than the Legend of Hercules or Alexandria, Minnesota's monstrous Paul Bunyan? Does your heart burn, as Paul's did to make Christ known?

Back in the 1850's David Livingstone, of "Dr. Livingstone I presume" fame, was a missionary and explorer for nearly 30 years in East and South Africa carrying the message of Jesus to thousands of Africans. In his journal he wrote:  
I place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in relation to the kingdom of Christ. If anything will advance the interests of the kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall most promote the glory of Him to whom I owe all my hopes in time and eternity.

That's some powerful passion for being about the work of God's Kingdom and strongly echoes Paul's words to the Philippians. Africa is now the most Christian continent – Dr. Livingstone's witness to Jesus Christ was foundational in that event. What do you possess that you would gladly give away for furthering the Kingdom of God?

Each of us as Christians and all of us as a congregation are faced daily with how we are going to live out our faith and be involved in sharing the Gospel. Jehovah is in the midst of some challenging decisions about where God is leading us. As your pastor I am confident that God's hand will lead and guide us as we seek, pray, and consider all the opportunities before us as God's people in this place.

In our pluralistic society it is often easiest to keep to ourselves who we are in Christ Jesus and what that means to us – we don't want to offend anyone and certainly don't want to risk our lives? But outweighing our fears, personal and as a congregation, must be the overwhelming knowledge that the forgiveness of sins is still the greatest need of all humanity and bringing Christ to others while meeting their needs – listening to people of other faiths – welcoming them as friends as the Old Testament instructs all Christians, Jews and Muslims – respecting them while remaining true to our own *Euangelos* Good News of Salvation through Jesus Christ alone – that is our calling. The most unlikely of people are known to be the most successful vessels of God's grace – becoming servants, as Christ became our servant. Out of the paradox of conversion comes the miracle of God's love available to all and shared through us. AMEN