

## **A Sermon for the Conversion of St. Paul, January 25, 2009**

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The conversion of St. Paul falls appropriately within Epiphany-tide, for it is one of the foremost biblical stories in which Jesus reveals himself to someone. It is unique because Paul was *not* among the quiet faithful who were happy to know about Jesus. Paul was an enemy of the infant church.

Our epistle lesson says that Saul, not yet renamed Paul, was “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.” One can imagine what such a form of breathing sounded like, but, in any event, this was clearly a very angry man.

Acts also tells us that when the church’s first martyr St. Stephen was stoned to death, those who threw the first stones left their coats and belongings in Saul’s safe keeping, and that Saul gave his vote in favor of the murder (Acts 7:58, 8:1).

While we find it a biblical pattern that God reveals himself to unlikely people like shepherds, fishermen, prostitutes and tax collectors, here we have reached a whole new level of the implausible. Jesus reveals himself to someone who literally hated him.

Saul may have been the most religious person to have become an apostle. The fishermen and certain others whom Jesus called were faithful Jews, to be sure. But, according to his own account, Saul was a Pharisee who observed his religion according to its most strict form (Acts 26:5).

Ironically, among the systems of belief in Israel, the theology of Saul, the hater of Christians, was closest to that of the early church. The Pharisees accepted all of the Old Testament writings, not just some like the Sadducees. And the Pharisees believed that there would be a physical resurrection. That is, that those who were dead would be raised to new life in bodies.

The Pharisees believed that if the people of Israel zealously observed the Torah, or Law of Moses, then God would defeat Israel’s enemies and fulfill his promises to the nation. In the light of the Damascus road, Paul discovered that Israel’s vindication would come, not through her keeping of the law, but through a person, Jesus the Messiah.

Paul came to see that Jesus accomplished by his life and death what the Pharisees had hoped to accomplish by observing the law. That is, Jesus has done for Israel what Israel was unable to do for herself. Israel would be saved, not by her Torah observance, but by her faith in Jesus the Messiah, who is the fulfillment of the Torah.

Paul’s conversion produced a new humility. Before he saw Jesus, Paul would say, “I am a devout Jew, circumcised on the eighth day, a member of God’s chosen people, born of pure Hebrew stock, a zealous Pharisee and blameless by the standard of the Torah (Philippians 3:4-6). After he saw Jesus, Paul said, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church” (1 Corinthians 15:9). And again “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15).

The conversion of Paul illustrates that our faith is all about the person of Jesus Christ. Our faith is not, primarily, about trying to obey moral rules or be good; it is not primarily about doing religious things. It is about an encounter with Jesus the Messiah of Israel that leads us to see ourselves in a new way.

False religion, even false Christianity, is rooted in the idea that there is something we can do to be justified before God. False religion is based on the idea that my moral effort or my religious practice can earn me good standing with God. True, religion sees Jesus, the Son of God in his glory and perfection and realizes that no matter what we do, we will still fall short of his perfection.

False religion grades on a curve, in comparison with others. It says, "I am a reasonably good person, perhaps not a saint, but better than most and certainly among the top third of God's class. True religion begins on the Damascus road, in comparison with the Son of God. True religion sees the purity and beauty of our Lord and sees, in sharp relief, the difference between us and him. For Jesus reveals our inner motives; he causes us to see, not only what we do, but also why we do it.

We can know the presence of Christ in the two-fold and paradoxical experience that results from the encounter with him. First, we feel conviction of sin in his presence. All our illusions of virtue are removed in the light of his glory. But, then we feel acceptance, as conviction and sorrow lead to forgiveness. We learn that Jesus reveals the truth about ourselves in order to reveal the truth about him: that he came into the world to save us.

Jesus appeared to Paul on the road. Where do we see him? We see him when we read the word of God with open hearts. We see him in the Blessed Sacrament when we come with eyes of faith. We see him along the road of life when he interrupts our journey to remind us that he is Lord. We see him in the life of prayer. We see him in the members of his body who love us in his name.

We must continually return to the encounter with Jesus. For sometimes we, like Saul, become full of zeal for all the wrong things. This is why the prayer of silence and solitude is important. Sometime we need to stop in our tracks and hear the voice of Jesus, who says to *us*, "Why are you doing this?"

We must return again and again to the person of Jesus Christ to remember the lofty goal of our faith, which is to be like him. For Jesus shows us not only what we are not; he also shows us what we are called to be. As St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, our goal is:

To be found in [Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. (Philippians 3:9-11 KJV).

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