

SPG#154, Conversion of St. Paul

January 27, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 26:9-21

Galatians 1:11-24

Matthew 10:16-22

Who was the Apostle Paul? That question might seem easy to answer. But it could also seem very difficult. The reading from Acts today recounts the familiar story of the man Saul, when he was encountered by a great light on his way to Damascus.

At the time of this experience Paul was known by his original name of Saul. By profession he was a tentmaker. He was known as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Some traditions have him participating in the death of the Deacon, Stephen, who was stoned to death. On his way to Damascus he was confronted by a blinding light out of which a voice spoke saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

The experience changed Saul dramatically. He turned from persecution of Jesus’ followers to become a great apostle. His name changed from Saul to Paul. Through his efforts and others the Church spread north and west into Europe.

Paul’s experience has become an often referred to model of changing from unbelief to fervent faith. Many preachers, some of them on TV, will energetically encourage listeners to turn from a life of sin to belief in Jesus Christ. It seems that many feel that if being dramatically changed worked for the apostle Paul, then it must apply to everyone.

And so there is considerable investment for as many as possible to have some type of a dramatic epiphany, similar in nature to Paul’s.

But the real challenge, in regard to appreciating the Apostle Paul is not just to appreciate the story of the blinding light. The real challenge is to put this blinding light experience next to other information about Paul. Then it is possible to come away with an unsettling picture of the man who is our namesake.

Paul was also the man who disagreed with the Jerusalem Church over the treatment of Gentiles. As a writer, he may have been unequalled in the New Testament. In his letter to the church at Philippi, it is evident that the people there had a special place in his heart. From 1 Corinthians 13, words attributed to Paul: "Love is patient. Love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." In Paul's letter to the Philippians is written, "Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Countless Christians, over the centuries, have been inspired by the reading and re-reading of the words of Paul. But also in the thirteen epistles in the New Testament are words attributed to him that we find unsettling. We find strong words about sexuality. We find the words that long hair degrades a man, but that long hair is a woman's glory. We find words that women should be silent in the church. But we also read these words in Romans, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a Deacon in the church at Cenchrae."

We have, for the most part, allowed Paul to be a person of his times. And we have allowed him to reflect some of the gender inequality of those days. And we have allowed that he was a first century Jew, which included prescriptions regarding hair styles and dress. But even with those allowances, we find some of what he says troubling and unsettling. I can recall several times as a young man, giving up on trying to construe Paul to be as nice as I would like for him to be.

And thus, there has been a tendency to see Paul in first one way, then another. Many have seen him as a kind of spiritual father to churches that spread north and west from Palestine. And his epistles indicate that he thought of himself in that role, as he gave advice and counsel on how to live the Christian life. Moreover, in his epistles, it is apparent that he loves the people in these churches. And it is apparent that he expects that they love him. But, in another contrast, it was not that long before the blinding light, that he was an intense persecutor of followers of Jesus. And I think we can surmise that pre and post blinding light, he must have been an accomplished writer and perhaps speaker. At times I have gone to a web site that has to do with the ancient city of Corinth. At this site one is able to see an image of the agora, the market place in the old city. On either side are the ruins of ancient structures, public buildings for one purpose or another. And there are indications that there were spaces for shops on the agora side of some of these buildings.

And so, while people came and went, buying fruit, vegetables, poultry, meat, and other foodstuffs, they might encounter someone like Paul, talking about Jesus Christ. Talking about the blinding light.

Talking about how he had been changed from persecutor to apostle. And so, around Paul, and especially in the synagogues, there was always the exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences.

There is no way for us to know for sure, but consider this. When Paul said that women should be silent in the church, it is documented that many meeting places of churches were supplied by women of means, who had control of these properties, in one way or another. Perhaps Phoebe, the Deacon, was one of these. Do you think a woman of means, perhaps like Phoebe – do you think that she would have said, “It is fine for you to meet in my house. But I will be able to say what I am led to say.”

Or do you think that is too far beyond the bounds of acceptable for the first century, that no woman ever would have said that? Hard to say, but I have my suspicions. Such a thing would not have been written down. And it would never have been included in an epistle meant for many churches.

And I wonder what were the mitigating circumstances around Paul’s other “unsettling words?”

And that question leads me to wonder about our 21st century role in regards to the apostle Paul. I wonder if we have studied him in too fragmented a way. I wonder if we have embraced some of the more congenial words of Paul and ignored the unsettling words.

I wonder if we would see Paul Number 1 say something, and Paul Number 2 say something else.

I am convinced in my own study that we need an appreciation of the whole man. We need an appreciation of all that he said, or wrote. That means that we must stretch our ability to appreciate to include those things that are not so pleasant to hear.

By the same token I believe that we are called to stretch and expand our spiritual hearts to embrace the life that we are in that includes terrorism, controversy in the church, climate change, and immense suffering. Is it possible to love terrorists who want us dead because we are Americans?

And if we are able to harbor the dynamic and unsettling presence of Paul, then we will be that much further along in embracing life as it is. We will be that much further along in accommodating the loving and challenging presence of Jesus Christ. And on the day of our Annual Meeting, as we look toward the future, that is not a bad place to be.

But it may be that the challenge to stretch our appreciation of diversity, to stretch our appreciation of the Apostle Paul, may be all struggle and discomfort. But on the way I think we will get glimpses of a new and wonderful blinding light of our own. And in this new world we should look for that new light, that new love in our hearts, and in the hearts of others.

I have used Thoreau's words from his essay on "Walking." And I want to use them again here.

".....We walked in so pure and bright a light, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such golden flood, without a ripple or murmur to it.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light. Amen.