

SPG#120, CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL

January 28, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 26:9-21

Galatians 1:11-24

Matthew 10:16-22

In the lives of many figures in the New Testament we get a snapshot of a person. And that picture, that snapshot becomes the way we remember that person. For example, Peter is remembered as a fisherman. He is remembered as the one who made the confession, **You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.** He was the one who denied that he knew Jesus three times. He was one who had a vision about a mission to non-Jews, Gentiles. He was one who became a famous apostle. Thomas is known as the one who doubted that it was Jesus standing before him. Matthew was known as a tax collector. James was known as the head of the church in Jerusalem.

But the Apostle Paul is different. It is true. We get snapshots of him too. But these different views are contrasting views, and in some cases seemingly conflicting.

His love for people, particularly those of the "household of faith," as he said, is legendary. Listen to his words to the people in the church at Rome:

For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Part of Paul's perceived ministry was to be encouraging to people in the churches.

Also in Romans, **For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

But then we have all heard or read his words from Corinthians about women being silent in the church. And we have heard of his words that seem to demean those who are not heterosexual. At the same time, in the same letter to the Corinthians is 1 Corinthians 13 on love. These words are frequently read at weddings.

So, there are no easy one dimensional descriptions of Paul. And if we settle on one way of seeing him, then we inevitably will run into a contrast at some other point.

But in this way he is similar to Jesus himself. For Jesus himself was hard to pin down from any one point of view. But for either Jesus or Paul there is something to be learned in our frustration. But that learning may not occur in the midst of our wrestling. But it may come afterwards because we were willing to wrestle.

St. Paul's, and all churches that are named St. Paul's are in somewhat of a unique position in this regard. Because every year, on the day of the Annual Meeting, we will again encounter the story of the Conversion of St. Paul. So, we can endure it. Or we can realize that there is an unusual but beneficial way of learning about this apostle.

We know that he was born in Tarsus, that he studied as a young person with rabbis such as Gamaliel. We know that by the time he reached adulthood he was steeped and learned in the Judaism of his time. We know how he became aware of the man Jesus and what he was teaching.

If he were here today in the flesh, he might tell us how he had persecuted the followers of Jesus.

We might ask him about that, about why he had been so opposed to them. And he might tell us that as one steeped in Judaism that he was convinced that this Jesus was a threat to the God of Israel and to the people of Israel. He might tell us that he at first saw this Jesus as a blasphemer, someone who made claims about himself that no one should make. Then he might tell us how he had pursued Jesus' followers and persecuted them. He might even tell us that he had been present when Jesus' follower, Stephen the Deacon, had been stoned to death.

We might realize, at that point, that even before he himself became a follower of Jesus, that he was already a deeply passionate and religious man. We might be impressed with the depth and the scope of his spiritual life, even at that point. He was so convinced that he was in the right that he was willing to be public and open with his abuse of Jesus' followers.

And so, as he told of us of his journey to Damascus one day, and how he encountered a traumatic and life changing vision, we might realize that even before the vision he was a spiritual man with credentials and with passion. We might even decide for ourselves, if he did not tell us, that he had had many visions and epiphanies, but none that had been life changing like this one had.

And so we would listen to him tell again the story of his walking on the Damascus Road when he was suddenly blinded by fantastically brilliant light, all around him and his companions. Out of the light came a voice that said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." Saul asked, "Who are you?" The voice said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Then the voice told him that he, Saul, was being called to deliver a word of truth to the Gentiles, and that he would be protected.

Then he would tell us how his name had been changed to Paul. And then he would tell us that later in Caesarea he was telling his story to King Agrippa and to Festus the governor. He had been brought there because the Jews accused him of blasphemy. Paul explained to Agrippa and Festus that he had only been faithful to this vision, that he had spread the word of Jesus in Damascus, in Jerusalem, in Judea, and to the Gentiles.

And so, Saul, a fervent persecutor of the followers of Jesus, in an encounter with the blinding light is transformed, changed. It is a defining moment. He now becomes a witness to the truth of Jesus Christ. He becomes a missionary to the Gentiles, an apostle.

As we consider this complex and inspiring man, it might occur to us that more than anything else this man wanted people to understand what he had been through.

He wanted the people who stood in his presence and the readers of his words, whoever they may be, to know what it was like to stand in the blinding light and talk with Jesus.

He wanted people to know what it was like to be sure of a way of living, and then to be changed from that in one experience.

In years to come I think Paul expected that people would already know something of the story. And I think with people knowing what they did, he expected that people would be affected by his presence, whether in person or in a letter. The story is so big and so deep. And what happened to him had the effect of vastly expanding his heart and his mind.

In fact, New Testament scholar Robin Griffith-Jones says that Paul was so confident that Christ was in him, that he, Paul, counted on people perceiving that in his presence, and even in his

letters. Griffith-Jones says Paul sought to re-present Jesus in his person and in his writing. So, if we are willing to wrestle with the Apostle Paul beyond just hearing a reading once and filing it under a question mark, then there is a question before us.

And that is, if one consistently encounters the breadth and the depth of Paul's story, what does it do to a heart and to a mind? How is one affected? How is one affected by this re-presenting of Jesus Christ? Hopefully the answer to that question would emerge in a conversation with some one of us. And hopefully the answers to that question will emerge in lives of love and service as we live and follow together. It is that emerging answer that Paul hoped for and looked for.

As we stand before St. Paul and before God on the day of our Annual Meeting, may our hearts and minds be open and willing. May our encounters with the Apostle Paul make us ready for the adventure and the joy of the Church. Amen

