

Sermon for the Conversion of Paul: 24 Jan 2021 *Mother Emma*

The story of the Conversion of St Paul, which we hear this morning, is one of those Biblical narratives which has caught the imagination of writers and artists alike over the centuries.

The phrases “Damascene conversion” or “road to Damascus moment” have been absorbed into English language and culture to describe any sudden realisation or change of heart which comes over someone, whether in a religious context or not.

There are, of course, two versions of this event: the one we heard in our first reading this morning comes from the Book of Acts, in which St Luke, himself credited with being a painter and a poet, gives a marvellous depiction of Paul’s dramatic conversion: the fall to earth, the blinding light, the voice from Heaven and the extraordinary effect this astonishing moment has on Paul’s life. The other account is given to us piecemeal throughout Paul’s letters – he refers to his “earlier life in Judaism”, of his zeal in persecuting Christians, of his call from God and the understanding of God’s Son in Jesus Christ, whom he, Paul, was now commissioned to follow and reveal.

The essentials are the same: Paul (or Saul, as he was previously known) was, as a member of the Pharisees, single-minded in his persecution of the new Christian sect, and equally zealous, after his moment of revelation that Christ was indeed the Son of God, in seeking to convert others to this view. Yet, the glimpses we receive of the event through Paul’s epistles have little of the drama of the Lucan version.

When Leonora in the parish office was looking for appropriate images to illustrate our poster for this service, she sent me several examples of well-known paintings. I realised when I re-read the passage that we are simply told Paul “fell to earth”, yet the many famous images of his falling from his horse meant that I was quite startled not to see a horse mentioned in Luke’s Biblical account! Luke’s artistic eye and dramatic narrative detail leave us with the vibrant images printed on our inner eye – no doubt in part what he was trying to achieve.

Yet perhaps for some of us, the story of the Damascene conversion has become something of a stumbling-block when we consider our own Christian journeys in faith.

Maybe it’s contributed to an expectation that we, too, will receive an unequivocal call from God, a undeniable moment of revelation which will take over our whole lives, changing our outlook, our actions and our understanding in the twinkling of an eye. But not all of us will have experienced a single moment of conversion, a moment when we knew without a shadow of a doubt that we were being called to follow Christ.

Of course, some people do exactly this experience. John Wesley, founder of the Methodists, described the moment when his faith became real to him, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

Others continue today to have more dramatic experiences which manifest themselves physically in one way or another, but there are also many who grew up in Christian

households, gradually absorbed the stories, the teaching and the practice and embraced the faith handed down to them as their own.

This week we began both our adult and our youth Confirmation courses, in the hope and faith that we shall be able to hold a Service of Confirmation at St Mary Abbots on 22nd April. The first session always offers the chance for us all to share our stories, including the ways we have come to faith or sought to explore it in different ways at different points of our life. Our adult group included people whose journeys had begun in a variety of different Christian denominations; some who had experience of other faiths and yet others who came from backgrounds in which faith did not feature. It was an appropriate embodiment of this week's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

We spoke together of the moments of both doubt and celebration we had experienced along the way; the parts these had played in the events of our lives and the ways in which the Church's portrayal of God and of faith had affected our reactions to the Christian story. Yet many people spoke predominantly of a sense of peace arising from the awareness of the presence of God in their lives. This wasn't generally from a dramatic conversion moment, but from a slow or even sporadic awareness of his love and care and forgiveness.

For Paul, the revelation on the Damascus Road made clear for him that Jesus Christ was indeed the Son of God, who had come to earth to share our human lives, to die for us out of love and self-sacrifice, and to assure us, as we turned to him in faith of God's absolution for all our sins. It drove him to travel far and wide throughout the Roman Empire, often at great personal risk, to share this news with others; to explain to his Jewish brothers and sisters his conviction that the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament had truly been fulfilled in the coming of Christ, and to announce to the Gentiles that taking the step of faith was enough to ensure redemption.

The word "conversion" of course means a "turning around" or changing of direction.

It may feel too sudden a concept to describe a lifelong pilgrimage, during which we experience a whole host of little moments, bringing us closer to the love of God, to the understanding of Christ's significance for us personally, and, we hope eventually, to a desire to share with others the joy and reassurance which this faith has meant for us.

But Paul's story reminds us that, whether sudden or gradual, a conversion does not have to change our personalities, or the essence of who we are – Paul himself was clearly a determined, eager and single-minded man throughout his life – it simply guides our hearts and actions along the right path towards the love of God, the self-giving of Christ and the peace of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.