

The Conversion of Paul

Acts 9: 1-22
Beverley Minster 25.1.04

One morning this week I sighed deeply, looked at my fellow worshippers at Morning Prayer, and said to myself 'Here goes'. It was the Lectionary's fault. We're reading through 1 Corinthians in the mornings, and it was the end of 1 Corinthians 7. St Paul was in full flow about marriage. The best he could say, grudgingly, was that if men and women were to have these lustful passions, then marriage was probably best, but he'd much rather people didn't. 'Here ends the second lesson' I said. 'Thanks be to God' said Gareth, to be married in three weeks' time.

What a different place the church would be had St Paul not come to faith in Christ. We'd have many fewer such awkward moments as we read through the New Testament, I'm sure. I don't much like the bit about women wearing hats or being silent in church, when it comes to that. But put the difficult passages to one side for a moment (and Paul himself says that his thoughts on marriage are his, not God's), and say the words again:

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It is Paul who pioneers the mission to the Gentiles, corroborating Peter's vision and putting it in to devastating practice, Paul who plants the churches of the New Testament, Paul who answers the vision and comes to mainland Europe, Paul who begins to formulate Christian doctrine and theology, Paul who writes 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament, Paul who stands before rulers and is tortured and imprisoned. It is impossible to imagine the church without his ministry, impossible as some of his writings are to apply to the world in which we live.

A recent commentator goes so far as to say: 'The most important event in human history apart from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus'.

And, in the several accounts of his coming to faith, the most remarkable fact is that, of all people, he was the most unlikely. He calls himself 'the chief of sinners', not because he mispent his youth or was rescued from a life of immorality or serious crime. He was a devout man. Paul's conversion was, in one sense, from one type of spiritual discipline, one life of prayer, one type of engagement with scripture to another, from Pharisaic Judaism to Messianic Christianity. But Paul's expression of his pharisaism was to be chief among the persecutors of the fledgling Christian group, consenting to the execution of Stephen, ravaging the church, throwing Christians into prison, and taking his purge to Jewish communities further afield.

The sad history of religion is that passionate adherents of faith can become so fixed on their interpretation, so focussed on their own view, that they see any deviation as something to be rooted out and attacked with violence, justified by their view of their God.

When Paul has a vision of the risen Christ (and he is able to call himself an apostle, later, because an apostle is one who has talked with Christ), he is asked a question. 'Why?' 'Why do you persecute me'. It is loaded with meaning. Paul cannot answer it. It hangs in the air.

Had it been 'Why are you persecuting these people' there may have been some reason, but in the question Paul is faced with the drastic truth. These people are not some little sect whose leader has gone and whose reason for existence will peter out as they themselves are removed from the scene. Jesus lives in these people, and they will not be defeated. Paul is attacking Jesus himself. It is an instant revelation, profoundly shocking, utterly life-changing.

As a result Paul gains his salvation and his life's work. There is always the danger that he will follow Christ in the same way that he was a Pharisee, attacking enemies with terrifying force. Perhaps this is why he spends three years in the desert, tempering his faith, and gaining the balance which will allow him to be at the centre of many storms, yet not lash out. Those who follow him in the faith might learn much from his silence, and his action under pressure.

A flash of light, the sound of a voice, blindness, visions, scales falling from eyes. It's all a bit much really, and not really to be looked for, is it? Surely we meet with God in the gentle epiphanies of great music, stunning scenery, soaring architecture, incomparable liturgy. Well, yes we do, but if all this vision business seems mythological, something to be explained away in this all too rational, scientific, positivist age, where all must conform to the received way of doing, and above all must not offend the dictates of taste, let tell you about someone who had just such a conversion, and who told me about it, sitting in my office, this week.

It was an overwhelming vision of blinding light, and being taken by the hand by Christ. This was not in a church, nor did it happen to someone who was earnestly seeking enlightenment. It just happened, and that person walked into a church with this experience and no knowledge of the church or what to do with what had just happened. It was thirty odd years ago, and he is a faithful worshipper still. He would say that if it happened to him, it could happen to anyone. You tell him that such a conversion is a thing of the past and not for now.

Thank God that Paul had a vision, took it to be Christ, applied his immense mind and all his resources to making the vision part of his life, and spoke about Jesus to all who would listen. However we do it, all Christians must listen to the challenge of Christ, and he will have a question especially for us which cannot be glibly answered and which will change our lives. There may be one conversion. For me there have been several. Why not follow Christ? Why not be open to the power of the Spirit? How about ordination? What are you going to do with your money? Will you work for the constant renewal of the Church of England where you are?

God's modus operandi is to take people by surprise. Do not be surprised if God takes you by surprise.