

# Homily for the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

*A homily preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament at the Sung Mass for the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, on Wednesday, 25 January 2023, by Mr Simon Billington, Ordinand, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford*

**‘And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed’ ACTS 9.20-21**

**O**VER each Christmastide, adaptations of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* are watched by many, whether that is a stage adaption or one for film. Through various streaming services, people can now pick to be dazzled by the graphics of the Jim Carey animated film or warmed by the original portrayal of the Dickensian protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, by Alistair Simm. Ebenezer Scrooge is put through the workings of a much recognised literary device, one that is becoming increasingly prominent in film, television and literature. Scrooge undergoes a conversion that radically reshapes his narrative. Whether it is a film or a novel, audiences and readers revel in the thrill of a protagonist, or antagonist, who seemingly abandons the trajectory they are on in search of a new pathway or direction. Sometimes we observe this change taking place slowly, over many chapters or episodes, and other times they happen drastically in response to an event. What underpins either of these models is that a truth breaks through the reality of a character’s narrative, and what is around them subsequently dissolves. Today, on the Feast of the

Conversion of St Paul, we are invited to meditate upon when truth itself was revealed on a road outside of Damascus and the monumental events that followed as a result.

The conversion of the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, is a global phenomenon. Despite the various debates had over the life of St Paul, his teaching and his theology, the historicity of his Conversion is assured. Whilst on a dusty road, *en route* to Damascus, with letters authorising the search for a Jewish cult attributed to the recently executed Jesus of Nazareth, something happened to Saul of Tarsus; something that catapulted him to the forefront of this cult's mission. Of this much, historians and theologians alike are agreed. After which they go their separate ways, and the debating battle lines are drawn up again. But it is something, nonetheless, to have that much universally asserted about this individual called Saul. And so we are left with the challenge of understanding what happened on that road, when the only agreed aspect of this encounter was that a) it happened and b) it caused seismic changes for the development of Christianity.

To unpick what we refer to as the Conversion of St Paul, we need to have a clear a picture about how Saul might have understood what this developing movement was and why it threatened so much for him. The

Jewish faith and identity of Israel are bound by three central pillars; the belief in a singular God, one chosen people by this God, and one future for that nation and the world: what we would refer to as monotheism, election and eschatology. The history of Israel is punctuated by these three characteristics, as was their future; and Saul is interested with these beyond his being a member of the tribe of Israel insofar that he is also a Pharisee, something he would testify about even after his first encounter with the risen Christ. If we were to summarise three specific concerns that Saul would have had for the nation of Israel as a Pharisee, they would have been upholding of the Law, commitment to the purity of Israel, and belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead. And the cult that sprung up following the execution of this Nazarene called Jesus appeared to threaten each of these concerns. Saul would have been upholding his duty as a Pharisee to protect the nation of Israel by taking a firm stand against those that were followers of Jesus. They threatened the purity of Israel, and their claims about Christ's Kingship risked the ire of the Roman occupiers. Added to this is Saul's own witness of the stoning of St Stephen, during which (albeit holding the coats) he would have listened to Stephen declare that, despite having received the law by angels, they had failed to uphold it before Stephen witnessed the opening of the heavens and Christ sitting at the right hand of God.

And this is where our Epistle opens, with Saul ‘yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord’, ready to take captive and bound those that, like Stephen, were making claims about this carpenter from Galilee being the long awaited for Messiah. And there, on the road to Damascus, whilst with other travellers, the unthinkable happens. A bright light from the heavens appears, and there is a sense in which Saul can recognise the divine nature of this glorious presence which he now finds himself in front of, but he would not have anticipated the response to his question, ‘Who art thou Lord?’: ‘I am Jesus, who thou persecutest’. For Saul, this Jesus the Nazarene was a carpenter of humble origins, not a prophet or priest, and most certainly not a king; a man who had been stripped, nailed to a tree, pierced in the side by a lance, and buried in a tomb. Yet he was now in appearance before Saul, radiant with heavenly glory. The man who had denied and sought to dispel the claims that Jesus of Nazareth was the first of the resurrection was now confronted with Christ resurrected.

And amidst this bright and fearful light, Saul is presented with truth itself. Jesus had been indeed raised from the dead, had been exalted by God, and in this exaltation, His teachings, miraculous works, life, and death had been vindicated by the Most High God. Truly, this was the Messiah, God’s anointed one. Christ’s appearance to Saul is the revelation that He is the

fulfilment of the Law, the means of bringing together the Gentiles and Jews into a new people of God, and the signal of commencement of the Last Days. As John the Evangelist so wonderfully describes Jesus, He is the gate through which all must pass to witness to the truth of the New Covenant of the One God, by the new people of God in the assured hope of sharing in the bodily resurrection of Christ Jesus. Monotheism. Election. Eschatology. Moreover, those central issues for Saul, The Law, Election and Resurrection, become recurrent themes in Pauline theology. So, a challenging question for us to ask ourselves is to what extent did St Paul truly undergo a conversion whilst making his way to Damascus?

Well, if by conversion we are referring to the change in a set of beliefs, then we could contest whether or not St Paul underwent a conversion. He certainly adapted his understanding of The Law, his attitude towards the Gentiles, and their place as part the one people of God through Christ Jesus. But did his understanding and beliefs about the resurrection of the body change, or did the eschatological aspects of God's vision for the world undertake a conversion? Plenty of theological pieces have been written about this that argue both for and against. So where can we clearly see a conversion, where do we see a change? If we understand St Paul's conversion as a change in behaviour as a result of an encounter with Jesus, then we see conversion taking place. In the resurrected person of Jesus, St

Paul comes face to face with a King in the line of David with no need for earthly riches, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah in the form of God incarnate, and the eternal priest of the Eucharist not bound by the Temple of Jerusalem. In Jesus, both humility and glory meet, and this humility becomes a model for the life of St Paul. We see St Paul modelling what St Matthew has recorded for us; St Paul becoming ‘the last’ before the whole people of God.

St Paul’s conversion and his mission to the Gentiles are inextricably linked. Saul, who had been concerned that followers of Christ were polluting Israel by extending God’s election to the Gentiles, spends his Christian ministry as St Paul, committed to bringing those outside the Jewish nation into the New Covenant. Where before the events on the Damascus Road he may well have deemed such a notion as worthy of persecution, now to Asia and Greece he travels to witness to the life found in the resurrected Christ that has been freely given to the Gentiles. The truth to which St Paul testifies is a truth that, as is seen by his own example, humbles those who encounter it. During Christ’s earthly ministry, His humility was not a mask or a veil for His power and glory, but those around Him, and indeed us today, came to experience his incarnation. When brought face to face with the reality of Christ’s majesty as Prophet, Priest and King, St Paul undergoes a conversion to the culture of lowliness.

The feast that we celebrate today is not just a remembrance of the Conversion of one of our faith's leading figures, but also a reminder that Christ wishes to convene with us. Christ is present with us in our trials and our persecutions. His desire to communicate with us, to speak to our hearts can be found in our moments of prayer, of quiet contemplation, and in our acts of worship. St John Chrysostom writes these words of encouragement for our desire to see and encounter Christ, just as St Paul did throughout his life,

'How many are they that say: I should have wished to see his fair form, His figure, His clothes, His shoes. Why, here you see him, you touch him, you eat him. And while you are longing to see his clothes, he gives you himself, not only to look at but to touch and to eat and to receive within you'.

When we, in humility, come to meet with our Saviour, we are changed that touch more into his likeness. This is our ongoing conversion, our continued life of sanctification. In a few moments, when Christ is made present in the Eucharist, let us with due reverence and holy fear approach our God, seeking a conversion of our hearts. And, like St Paul, commit ourselves to a life of lowliness, forsaking what is around us in the pursuit of truth.