

The Year of St. Paul

The Easter Triduum with St. Paul

Homily for Good Friday 2009

When St Paul set out on his famous trip to Damascus, he was perfectly content with life. He was well-educated, respected, with a life and career of comfort and influence ahead of him; by the end of that day this had all been turned on its head. He willingly, even gladly, gives up everything that he had, and accepts instead a life of persecution and misunderstanding, of moving from place to place, of physical hardship and emotional exhaustion, that ultimately led to a violent death. *"I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ"* (Gal 3.8) Everything he once treasured is now just rubbish to be cast aside, so long as he can have Christ. What brought about such a total change?

What has happened to Paul is that he has met the risen Christ; and meeting the risen Christ means that he knows that the crucifixion was not the end of it all. The crucifixion was not the moment of evil's triumph, but of evil's defeat. So St. Paul now knows that whatever happens, ultimately God will be triumphant; and the God who cannot be defeated is something worth having. So St. Paul can look back at the cross and reflect on what was really going on that day on Calvary, and the letters he writes are the fruit of St. Paul reflecting on this event, and coming to understand more and more clearly what it means as he reads it in the light of the Jewish scriptures. Paul is brought to his knees in awe by the fact that, in spite of all his faults and failures, *"the Son of God loved him, and gave himself for him"* (Gal 2.20). He is deeply humbled by the fact that Christ does not just die for the good and the virtuous, but he died for us *"while we were still sinners"* (Rom 5.8). We might be prepared to give our lives for someone who was really good: Jesus died for us sinners.

Paul is overwhelmed by the love of God. The key, for him, is the cross, and that is why we venerate the cross today in our Good Friday liturgy. The cross is the sign of just how much God loves us. It is such an extraordinary sign that many refuse to accept it. For the devout Jew a God who reveals himself in weakness rather than in miraculous signs is simply incomprehensible; for a wise Greek it does not make sense, it is unreasonable. *"For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God"*. (1 Cor 1.22-4). For St. Paul the cross is the ultimate sign of God's power. The whole life of Jesus is a life of generous self-giving; he has so much, but he leaves behind the glory and the security and empties himself so totally that he endures a shameful death (Philippians 2.6-10), a death that was more than shameful because for the Jew the one who dies on a tree is not just unlucky, but is cursed (Dt 21.23). In his death Jesus has sunk as low as any human being can; there is no human experience that is worse than his. His Father even allowed Jesus to experience on the cross the feeling of God's absence. Separation from God is one of the effects of sin, so it is not an experience that Jesus otherwise knew, although we are very familiar with it. So on the cross the Father hands Jesus over and allows him to experience what it is like to feel the effects of sin, and it is this which cause Jesus' cry of anguish "Why have you forsaken me?". The cross is a sign of God's power because it shows that Christ has experienced the worst that any human being can; there is no person who could say to him 'you do not know what it is like'. In Christ God has chosen to descend from the very highest to the very lowest, so that we need not be alone. Christ has allowed himself to be further from God than anyone else, but God has brought him back; so no-one need feel so far from God that there is no hope This is the power of God, this is the wisdom of God. Paul is deeply moved by this unexpected divine generosity. "The love of Christ overwhelms us" he writes to the Corinthians (2 Cor 5.14). The cross matters for Paul because it shows that God can overcome any alienation with love; no-one is beyond hope, all who choose it can be reconciled. That is why Paul would sacrifice anything, so long as he can cling on to Christ.