

Homily for the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) Pauline Year - The Conversion of St Paul

Pope Benedict asked the Church to mark the twelve months from June 2008 until June 2009 as a 'Year of St Paul', because tradition tells us that Paul was born in about 7-10Ad - so this is somewhere around the two thousandth anniversary of his birth. January 25th is the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, and although the celebration of a Sunday normally takes precedence over the celebration of such feasts, this seemed a good opportunity to reflect a little on the place St. Paul occupies in the Church. Over the centuries vast amounts of words have been written about St. Paul; it is very difficult to sum up his message in just a few sentences.

In many ways Paul is a bundle of contradictions. He travelled on those famous missionary journeys, preaching and founding churches, yet we know very little about his preaching. We know what he wrote to churches that he had founded, but we know very little about what he said when he was there in person. Paul is a success at setting up Christian communities, but he himself admits that people do not find him an imposing speaker when he writes in 2 Corinthians:

"For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible'" (10.10)

Sometimes Paul makes us cringe because he uses language that we feel very uncomfortable with, such as when he tells wives to submit to their husbands (Colossians 3.18), but then he can say things that sound so modern and so liberating, such as when he writes to the Galatians:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3.28).

Sometimes Paul's writing can be impossibly dense and difficult to understand, so much so that the recent translator of the New Testament Fr Nicholas King SJ wrote "At times, I have to say, I have despaired of making [The Letter to the] Romans intelligible to a modern reader who has not much acquaintance with the Christian tradition"; but then at other times Paul uses language of majestic beauty and simplicity.

"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, 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" (Romans 8: 38-39).

"Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3.7-8)

"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2.19-20).

It can seem impossibly difficult to get to grips with St. Paul. We do not know where to start with reading his letters, so we probably don't start at all. But that would be a shame, and I want to invite you today to look once more at St. Paul. And the best starting point is the road to Damascus, because Paul the man, his background, his

history, and that experience as he set off to persecute the Christians, these are essential to understanding what he writes.

Paul was a Pharisee, brought up at the heart of Judaism, who learnt much of what he knew in Jerusalem, but he was also a Roman citizen and a fluent Greek-speaker, the language of civilised society and intellectual debate. It is difficult to imagine anyone with a better background to travel around the Mediterranean, preaching and debating. But as the story begins he is also a powerful opponent of Jesus' followers. He was there right at the beginning, when Stephen the first martyr was stoned to death, and he was setting off to Damascus to persecute Christians, not because he had been sent there, but because he himself decided it would be a good thing to do (Acts 9.1-2). But on the way to Damascus something quite extraordinary happens; this great persecutor of Christians has an experience so intense that he himself describes it as seeing Jesus (1 Cor 9.1), and St Luke thinks it is so important that he tells the story three times in the Acts of the Apostles (9.1-19; 22.6-16; 26;12-18). This meeting with the Lord was so intense, so powerful, that everything he had treasured before now seems like so much rubbish compared to the joy of knowing Christ (Philippians 3.7-8). Never before or since has there been such a striking example of God's power to change lives; yet that power is as strong now as it has ever been, and before we read a single word that Paul wrote, we should have in our mind this fact - God can turn lives around. Because of his own experience, Paul always believed that God could change people, and that is why he sometimes becomes so frustrated when people seem to resist God. Yet the opportunity is still there; do we dare invite God to turn our lives around, to upend us in the dust so that we can start again?

Because Paul has had this extraordinarily powerful encounter with Christ, Christ becomes the subject of his preaching. He was not converted by rational argument, or even by examples of good and holy living. His life was turned around by a meeting with the Lord, so he cannot stop himself from talking about Christ. And because it was this supernatural encounter that made such an impact, Paul is less interested in what Jesus said, or even what he did, but in who he is. There is no danger of mistaking the Jesus Paul talks about for a prophet or a preacher, because Paul insists that central to everything is the death and resurrection of Christ:

"I was resolved that the only knowledge I would have while I was with you was knowledge of Jesus, and of him as the crucified Christ" (1 Cor 2.2)

"As for me, it is out of the question that I should boast at all, except of the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6.14)

"If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without substance, and so is your faith...If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable" (1 Cor 15.14,19).

Finally, Paul's meeting with the Lord on the road to Damascus, that blinding light, seems to have seared itself into his brain. So close did he come to Jesus, that he offers his life to God, so that his conversion becomes so radical that Paul grows less and Jesus grows greater. It is Paul's greatest ambition that his mind will become one with the mind of Christ:

"Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2.5)

"Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God" (Rom. 12.2).

Fr Peter Newsam - Petworth - West Sussex

"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2.19-20).

So, and here is the point that I think we can usefully take away from this celebration, St Paul is not just a successful teacher and evangelist, not just a great and innovative theologian, he is also a man of holiness who offers us sound advice and guidance on what it means to be a disciple.