

 St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich
SUNDAY SERMON

Acts 9:1-6

Delivered by Gemma Dashwood on the 5th May 2019

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Before I start, I would like to offer full disclosure as to the situation here today.

(Place large L plate on pulpit)

I'd like to thank Father Steve for giving me this opportunity to preach at St Paul's today. Actually I say "thank" but ... well let's just say that my experience of a few weeks ago of being the only senior doctor on at night in a busy hospital when there were two concurrent cardiac arrests in two separate wards at 3am was less stressful than preparing to do this today. Anyway. I digress.

What I would like to talk about today is the conversion of Paul. This is a little surprising for me because up until recently I had no enthusiasm for Paul. I was under the impression that Paul was someone that I most definitely wouldn't get on with, especially when it came to his views on women and leadership. However, after exploring more about him and his letters while studying my Theology degree at St Francis College, I've had my own little conversion about my approach to Paul, but I'll come back to that later.

I've always struggled with the concept of conversion in the way that Paul experienced in our reading today. This is primarily because I am a "cradle Christian" - I've just always gone to church, always known about God, and always had Him in my life. I've never had a point in time where I changed from not knowing God to knowing God. There has been no "road to Damascus" event for me.

About half way through High School this became a slight problem, because a group of my fellow students became involved with the Charismatic side of church, with open, public conversion being a major part of their stories. For those of us who never had a major conversion experience we had to try and explain how we were really Christian.

It took me a little while to work out that a big Conversion moment was actually not necessary in order to recognise the ongoing presence of God in our lives. Moreover, I realised that my faith journey was in fact a series of ongoing conversions - various decisions I had to make along the way, times when I had to rethink my position on something, or even when I had to swallow my pride and admit that I was wrong. I think these events are all small but vital ways that God continues to call us to live our lives in His name. So a big Damascus moment like Paul's are certainly important events to recognise, but they are only one form of conversion, and often just the start of the road.

The “conversion” (whether it be a major one or just a small one), is not complete without carrying through with what the conversion means and requires of us. For Paul, it wasn’t just a case of realising the error of his ways and carrying on. “Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” doesn’t sound like he’s going to be able to go home and put his feet up, does it? And neither can we. Being called into a life with Christ is not just a case of accepting God and doing nothing more about it. The conversion process (whether it was dramatic or not) is a continuous one. It requires constant commitment.

As much as we would like to think that we might have all the answers, sometimes we need to have a little mini conversion experience to realise that we might not have it right after all. My ongoing learning about Paul is one example. Once I started learning more, I realised that I wasn’t correct in some of my assumptions. I’ve thus had to reset some of my thoughts and learn to understand things differently. I’ve also learnt this can actually be a very rewarding experience, and can potentially answer long held questions – and often in surprising ways.

However, Academic conversions are only really useful if they are transformed into practical living. We are called to *live* the Gospel, not just think it. And unfortunately this can be a bit trickier.

I’m sure we all have certain things that we struggle with in our lives. Things that we don’t understand or don’t accept. Things that we would wish could just be converted to our way of thinking so that all could be right with the world. However maybe what we need to discern is whether it could possibly be us that has got it wrong. Being judgemental of others who haven’t converted to your way of thinking is one of the dangers. We may see people who live in a different way from us and wish that they would just be, well.. more like us? Perhaps what we are truly called to do is to convert our closed minds to more open ones.

Throughout my study at St Francis College, for example, we have students in Formation from all different backgrounds, such as those in different family situations, different Anglican traditions, and even different understandings of the Bible! But the reward comes from sitting in fellowship and listening to each other as we discover new ways of thinking. It’s not always easy, but it is only by challenging ourselves to open our minds will we have the chance to discover ways that we may need to change. And through that process we receive some profound gifts. Even if we have to accept that we were wrong!

I am quite sure that Paul, as he was journeying into Damascus as part of his mission to persecute Christians, believed that he was in the right. However, when he experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus, he realised that he had been, in fact, quite wrong. Paul’s experience with the resurrected Jesus allowed him to undertake this change of heart. For a start, it’s much harder to persecute someone after you have actually had a personal encounter with them. After the passage we read today, we are told that Paul is temporarily blinded, and fasted for three days, and although we might not always have such intense physical response to a change in our heart, there is no doubt that our lives will be richer for it.

And so, as we all journey together, trying to live our lives for Christ, let us all be open to the conversion experiences that we need to continually undertake as we discern our own way to Damascus and let us, like Paul, be called into a fuller life with Christ.