

'Conversion of St Paul' – celebrated on 5/2/17 – SJD 8am – Acts 9: 1-22

Sometimes we need to go a long way to really meet with God for the first time. This journey may be as much in the mind and hearts as it is with our feet. For me my eventual meeting with Jesus Christ took place in my research room at University one night after everyone else had gone home. It was the culmination of much heart searching and reasoning. Each of us has a different story to tell – just as we have a different story to tell of how we fell in love. I say this because when we look at the story of the conversion of St Paul, it is very easy to see this as a kind of model for all conversions. Indeed some have presented it as such while casting doubts on any other religious experiences. Yet we don't all have 'Damascus road experiences' as God deals with us as individuals with different needs and expectations. The analogy with falling in love is a good one because that illustrates how we may achieve the same end, but by quite different routes. It seems to me the important thing is the destination not the journey – that we come to know and worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having said all that there are important aspects of this story which will come through in any such encounter with God and which remain vital if our relationship with him is to grow and develop.

The first and perhaps most important is the acceptance that we do get things badly wrong. Saul, as he then was, was a very strong minded and strong willed individual. He stood and watched the stoning of Stephen without any apparent remorse for what was happening¹. In fact so convinced was he of the 'rightness' of this destruction of this new 'belief' that he personally went to the High Priest to get documentation to extend the persecution to Damascus². During his three days of blindness³ he must have contemplated all this and wondered where he could have gone so wrong. It is the same with us – and often for the same reasons. We may need to rethink some of our traditional, perhaps inherited, thinking as God breaks in in new ways. Revival in all its forms always involves a new vision and new God centred 'thinking'. Paul thought Jesus to be a fraud – I doubt that we do, but our understanding of who Jesus is and how Jesus is working today can be equally blinkered.

The second lesson we see is that left to our devices we are likely to continue along our path of delusion and self-destruction. We cannot find God – He finds us! God breaks into Paul's life to rescue him from his false understanding. His religious piety was wrongly directed, just as ours may be. Paul worshipped a God that did not exist; he failed to understand the true meaning and promises of the Jewish scriptures; ultimately he ended up persecuting the very Messiah he sought - Jesus himself.⁴ However God broke in and ultimately sent him to the very people he despised – the gentiles.⁵ Over time, those he once despised he came to love with a depth of love which came from Christ himself.⁶

Grace is at the root of all spiritual enlightenment. God is so much greater than we are and we are so messed up by sin that without God's love we could never hope to come into a living relationship with him. What is true for Paul is true for us – if we have met with Jesus. Our journey may be different but the result is the same and our response – one of gratitude and worship – is seen here in the transformed Paul.

'Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised.'⁷ No arguing and debating any more – just simple faith, gratitude and service. May it be with us.

¹ Acts 8:1

² Acts 9:1-2

³ Acts 9: 9

⁴ Acts 9:4

⁵ Acts 9: 15

⁶ See eg Philippians 1:3

⁷ Acts 9:18