

Matthew 19:27-end; Galatians 1:11-16; Jeremiah 1.4-10.

Conversion of Paul, 25th January 2015

St. Andrew's Totteridge - 8:00 & 10:00 a.m.

Who are the First & Last?

*O God, help us to listen to your Word with understanding, to receive it with faith, and to obey it with courage, for Jesus Christ's sake.*

Today is the festival of the Conversion of Paul. By any account, St. Paul is an extraordinary figure. At one time a zealous and fanatical proponent of a fundamentalist form of Judaism, to the extent of being a savage persecutor of the early Christian movement, Saul, as he was then known, experienced that famous moment on the road to Damascus, falling from his horse and being struck blind by the power of the vision visited upon him. Today, I suppose it would be a bit like one of the more radical leader/executioners of the IS movement in Syria suddenly becoming an enlightened evangelist for an all-inclusive form of loving and compassionate Christianity.

Faithfulness is always honoured, but not according to our own criteria, such as long service, dedication, commitment, or great energy – Saul was all of these things: “**many who are first will be last, and the last will be first** (Mt. 19:30).” Matthew relates this saying just after Jesus tells the story of the rich young man who wants to follow him, but “**who went away grieving, because he had many possessions.**” The same story occurs in Mark & Luke, but it is only in Mark that we hear about how Jesus, “**looking at the young man, loved him** (Mk.10.21).”

I am spellbound when the gospels grant us such clear insight into the loving heart of God, revealed to us here thru' Christ. No matter what we've done, no matter how much we may idolize the wrong things, no matter how much we may think we've earned our place in heaven... no matter how much we hold and even promote distorted perceptions and opinions, about other people and even about ourselves, we are each seen and still loved... but I believe especially so if we grieve over what we know in our heart of hearts to be the error of our ways.

Mark makes a point of mentioning Jesus' response to the young mans grief, and it's just the kind of response that I'd expect of an ever-merciful God. He loved him all the more for the evident suffering he was having to endure. After all, what is grieving? To grieve is to feel intense sorrow, to suffer great distress. It usually involves a need to withdraw from the world, a bit like a snail pulling in its horns and sheltering in its body after suffering what is often seen as an attack.

We don't know to what extent the rich young man was able to change his ways after his encounter with Jesus. Did he retreat and change, or did he just continue, ignorant or uncaring after he'd numbed himself to his grief? We just don't know. But we do know about Paul and how his experience worked a 180 degree change in his attitudes and practices.

So how is this story relevant for us? I don't think there are many extremists present today like Paul who are guilty of violent or murderous persecution, but I am quite sure that there are those of us who have, at some point in our lives, behaved thoughtlessly, selfishly, even cruelly, in thought, word and deed, towards a fellow human being. Perhaps more recently than we may have thought. Maybe you did think about things like this when we offered our confession at the beginning of the service? That's a good place to begin; but if you didn't think about it at all, then maybe you should.

The question then arises, what are we going to do about it? Hopefully, we will have noticed that we behaved badly and can think about how to take action. If we did notice, then we might find that we want to behave like that snail for a while, pull in our horns, retreat into the safety of our shell, think about what we did and resolve to try to turn a negative into a positive. But if we didn't notice, like Saul didn't notice until God brought him up short, it's very difficult to make amends.

And therefore this begs the question, how well do you know yourself? Do you stop and think about how your behaviour affects the people around you. Do you listen to what they're saying to you? God may be trying to speak to you thru' them. How often do you pause and reflect, 'am I thinking just for myself here', or 'should I really make that phone call or write that message', or 'say something thoughtless to this person I know, because it might hurt them or undermine them in some way.' I may be feeling

angry, disappointed, hurt or rejected myself, but that doesn't give me the right to behave in this way.

I think these are the times that God wants to work on us just like he worked on Saul. He may or may not actually throw us from our car or strike us blind, but it's precisely in moments when we feel threatened, tired, anxious or under attack that we are most likely to behave badly, and these are the moments when we should try hardest to be on our guard. These are the moments, when we want to respond out of fear, envy, selfishness or disrespect, that I think we're being tested to do God's will and not our own.

So my message to you today is, don't wait for that road to Damascus moment. Think about what it is to be the first and the last in this world, and then think about what it is to be first and last in the kingdom of heaven. God is trying to reach us each and every day. He especially loves you when you grieve over difficult situations, and he walks with you in Christ as a friend, urging you to change your ways and do the right thing, just as he urged Saul to become Paul.

*"Spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen."*

## Matthew 19:27-30

27 Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' 28 Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

## Jeremiah 1.4-10 Jeremiah's Call and Commission

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 5 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' 6 Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' 7 But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.' 9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

## Galatians 1:11-16

11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that

was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being

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