

## The Conversion of St. Paul.

January 25<sup>th</sup> 2015.

*Jeremiah 1: 4-10, Acts 9: 1-22, Matt 19: 27-30*

God makes strange choices. Saul of Tarsus was a strange choice; a mysterious choice for a person who would lead a Christian movement to change the world.

Saul was dedicated to destroying Jesus' followers. He had dragged Christians from their homes in Jerusalem. He joined in the execution of Stephen. We meet Saul today on his way to continue his 'search and destroy' mission against the Christians in Damascus. He was on a mission as extreme and horrific as the terrorists we see on TV today.

Saul had made many people frightened. Today it was his turn for a truly frightening experience. There was a flash of light that knocked him to his knees. A voice called out, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul, this great warrior breathing fire and destruction, is now led blind into Damascus. All his dogmatic revenge and his hateful antagonism had come crashing down. In humility he fasted and prayed. God had certainly got his attention, reinforced by a dramatic vision of Christ.

Why would God choose such a man? Was it that Saul was committed, educated, passionate, courageous, hardworking and thorough and God needed this man reformed to head up a vital area of evangelism and mission?

Ananias reminded God of what Paul was like when he received the call to pay him a special pastoral visit. Reassured by God he helped Saul regain his sight and find some understanding of what to do next. He mentored him into the new Christian community in Damascus and his new mission for taking the Christian message to much of the Mediterranean area. We hear no more of Ananias, yet he was a vitally important person in the right place for a significant ministry. He stood up for Paul in what must have been a strange time. One can imagine people asking, "is this man Saul safe? Can we trust him?"

Another person whose call was a similar paradox was John Newton. He was the son of a ship's captain who was mostly away. John's mother took him to worship. When John was 6 his mother died. Neighbours took him in. In 1733 his dad returned home and took him to sea and trained him as a ship's officer. Eventually, John became the Captain of a slave ship and traded in slaves, buying them in Africa and returning from Jamaica with a cargo of rum. It was exciting, risky and adventurous. He became wealthy and very comfortable, but increasingly corrupted by his way of life. He tried to corrupt the slaves and the traders. Everyone thought him to be a hard and cynical man. Then In 1748 John read the book entitled 'The Christian Way'. The author reminded people that life was short and that to do one's best to do the will of God was a very fulfilling life.

There came a violent storm worse than anything John had known and terrified he asked God for help.

God had got his attention. John told people of his conversion and began the process of life transformation. He ceased being a slave trader, selling his ships to William Wilberforce, whom he later joined in campaigning against the slave trade. He studied Greek and Hebrew to become a priest. He wrote the hymns Amazing Grace, Glorious things of thee are spoken and many other hymns. When we sing 'who saved a wretch like me' we can understand a feeling that we too may have known. God's purpose is to make something of every one of us throughout the course of our lives. Like Paul, John Newton felt the rough times, as we sometimes do also when one might feel lonely, or a failure and chilled with disappointment. How reassuring to know that God's love never ceases - he would still love to rescue us and set us on a joyful way.

Conversion is like a spinning top. When the top stops people are facing a different direction. God's grace and power enables a new life to begin.

Have you noticed that when God calls that the call is simple. "Saul, Saul", just two words. Abraham was called when he was old to go to a new land. Moses was called at the burning bush, even though he was a criminal and was unskilled at speaking publically.

St. Francis had a significant turning point. It appeared like a crossroad, presenting the invitation to journey in a new direction. It is leprosy month. One call for Francis was through an encounter with a leper, literally at a crossroad where shelters were built for those with leprosy. Francis overcame his revulsion and fear to jump off his horse and embrace the leper. Through his impetuous, intuitive embrace Francis expressed his care in a way that could actually be felt by the leper. He would feel loved and included in society.

I wonder if your life has been like that when you have felt a call to change your life. Perhaps a change in circumstance or health triggers such thoughts.

Or some are like Jeremiah, who feel a call when a child. They have always known God and follow God in ways that seem appropriate.

Jeremiah watched a potter reshaping some clay. He saw that God, the potter, never despairs of creating something beautiful from our lives, even though they may have many flaws and imperfections from the choices we have made. God is always ready to accept us as we are and to begin moulding and reforming us afresh so that we are no longer as we were. God is concerned with our potential rather than with our past.

St. Paul said that we are rather like clay jars, ordinary and fragile, subject to breakages, yet God makes wonderful provision for our frailty and creates from our very raw material vessels that become containers of divine treasure which can carry the good news of Christ to the world.

Thanks be to God.