

Homily for Monday, Jan. 25, 2021

Feast of Paul's Conversion "Scales fell from his eyes ..."

Texts: Acts 22:3-16 Mk 16:15-18

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

I love to read biographies, autobiographies and memoirs to see how people's lives unfold – what twists and turns they meet on the way and how they manage them. So, I'm delighted with our first reading today! Provided by the Lukan Acts writer, we have a very short biography of Paul, but it is loaded with information.

Paul was born in Tarsus, a bustling commercial crossroads city in the Roman Empire on a river that emptied into the nearby Mediterranean Sea. Paul thus was a Roman citizen but of Jewish parents who raised him in Jerusalem where he got an excellent education in the Jewish Law and Tradition from Gamaliel, a Pharisee and outstanding teacher. But while Gamaliel knew in his Jewish setting when to interpret the Law leniently, Paul followed the more stringent path, zealously persecuting the first generation of Jesus-followers, even dragging them, chained, into the Jewish courts for harsh judgment.

But God had other plans for this man – big ones, in fact! Paul's conversion is a dramatic one. He is blinded by the light; he is humbled by dependency on others; and then, when the scales fall of his eyes, he SEES AGAIN. And this time, it is the very Light and Way of God in Christ through the very Power of the Holy Spirit that fills him with a very different kind of zeal. Paul surrenders, is baptized and then gets right to it, travelling from city to village to city all around the northern and eastern regions of the Mediterranean Sea, not persecuting and prosecuting, but pulling people freely into the Way of Jesus the Christ. He works well with the Jews but he is most successful with the Gentiles.

Paul was a gifted man. He knew Aramaic, Greek and most likely Latin, too. He knew the Jewish Law and various forms of Greek rhetoric and Latin oration. He knew how to instruct and to persuade. He was an ardent man but also approachable, welcomed as he was into so many different kinds of homes along the way. He was so skilled in intercultural dialogue, knowing when to adapt his central message to cultural differences and also when to challenge cultures for their inherent fallacies, contradictions to the central message of Jesus.

Paul was never completely successful in this effort, for child abuse – and especially boys – racism, slavery and patriarchy persisted. But Paul lived from his center: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me ..." (Gal 2:20) Paul persisted in his preaching and doing through the many twists and turns of his life: humiliations, shipwrecks, imprisonment and ultimately death on a cross.

And us today? We too have this ongoing challenge to live from our center in Christ and to keep at the cultural issues of our day: child sex trading, persisting racism and

patriarchy, individual rights over the common good of all in fighting the pandemic, extremism, abandoned people and climate change as examples. As Inaugural Poet Amanda Gorman put it last week, we “are far from polished, far from pristine. ...” But we followers are called to keep at it by living confidently from our life in Christ. We can, to quote our president’s inaugural words, put “our whole souls into it.”

Let’s do it! Let’s remove any scales that may have accumulated in our eyes through indifference or self-comfort. Let’s take the twists and turns we need to heal and to move all of us into loving wholeness. And let us keep hope too for those who resist it. I think now I am going to pick up again Paul’s memoirs, his epistles, for a good dose of courage to encounter the challenges of our times. And Amanda’s inaugural poem and Joe’s inaugural address, too!