

FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL

Reflection

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

Did you know that there are three narratives in the Acts of the Apostles concerning Paul's conversion? I didn't know that either until I read the footnotes for this morning's text in my bible. They are each in very different contexts where Paul has to get himself out of a critical situation. In every instance, though, there are these words: "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? ... I am that Jesus whom you are persecuting. Get up now and stand on your feet.*" I want you "*to open the eyes of those to whom I am sending you, to turn them from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God; that they may obtain the forgiveness of their sins and a portion among God's people.*"

Who was this Saul anyway? Well, he 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 Jewish Law and Tradition from Gamaliel, a Pharisee and an outstanding teacher. While Gamaliel knew when to interpret the Law leniently, Paul followed a more stringent path, zealously persecuting the first generation of Jesus followers among the Jews, even dragging them chained into the Jewish courts for harsh judgment.

Paul's conversion is a dramatic one. He is blinded by the light; he is humbled by dependency on others with his companions guiding him into Damascus; and then, in meeting Ananias in Damascus when the scales fall off his eyes, he sees again. And this time, it is the *Light and Way of God in Christ* through the presence of the *Holy Spirit* that fills him with a very different kind of zeal. He is baptized and then gets right to it, travelling from city to town to village all around the eastern and northern regions of Asia Minor, not *persecuting* and *prosecuting*, but *pulling people* freely into the *Way*, the *Way* of following Jesus, as the first generations of Christians called it.

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 *persuade* and to *instruct*. He was an ardent man, but also approachable, welcomed as he was into so many different kinds of homes along the way, including Lydia, the purple dye maker, and Prisca and Aquilo, the first lay couple ministers. Paul was so skilled in intercultural dialogue, knowing when to adapt his Jesus message to cultural differences and also when to challenge cultures for their contradictions to the central message of Jesus.

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) He *persisted* in his preaching and teaching and healing

through the many twists and turns of his life: so many humiliations, shipwrecks, imprisonments, and ultimately death on a cross like Jesus.

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: anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Asian violence; our own white privilege as contributing to persistent racism; LGBTQI+ persons as full human beings; abandoned persons from persisting poverty; patriarchy putting down women and children; and climate change deniers.

Let's do it! Let's remove any scales that may have accumulated in our eyes through self-comfort or indifference. Let's take the twists and turns of our life to *dialogue* and move *all of us* into loving wholeness. And let us keep hope too for those who resist taking part in dialogue. I think now I am going to read *again* Paul's memoirs in the Acts of the Apostles for a good dose of courage to encounter the challenges of our times.

This Feast marks the end of the week dedicated to ecumenical dialogue among Christians. But Pope Francis has extended the process citing the need for interreligious conversations. Let us educate ourselves in the beliefs of other religious traditions and continue conversations with members of our families and our colleagues and friends from other faith traditions.

I'm going to read Paul again!