

Saint Thomas and Saint Thomas of the Air Church
Conversion of St Paul
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rmcneely+

From Terrorist to Evangelist

This week, the Church points us toward the conversion of St Paul.
Who had such a profound influence on Christianity.

Paul wrote a significant part of the Bible

By word count

His epistles to the Romans,

Corinthians

Galatians

Philippians

Colossians

Thessalonians

Timothy

Titus

Philemon

And Hebrews

Constitute about 25% of the New Testament.

His writings preceded the four Gospels and were formative of the
doctrine of Christianity.

The churches he established in Asia Minor,

Macedonia,

Greece,

Crete,

Cyprus

and the Balkan Peninsula

covered the Mediterranean World and were the foundation of a
new religion.

One cannot exaggerate the contribution and importance of Paul.

We know a good deal about Paul:

He was born between 5BC to 5AD

So he was about the same age as Jesus

And was at least a contemporary of Jesus.

He was born into a prosperous family in the business of making tents.

The Roman army was a good customer of the family business.

Paul was born and raised in Tarsus

In the Roman province of Cilicia

On the Mediterranean Coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

By virtue of his heritage

and birthplace in the free city of Tarsus

Paul was a citizen of Rome.

His family was of the Jewish tribe of Benjamin.

Paul must have shown promise as a young boy

And was sent to Jerusalem to study to become a rabbi

In the prestigious school of Gamaliel,

One of two top institutions of Paul's day.

So Paul received a top notch education in Hebrew, Greek

The Torah, Mishna, Talmud and Jewish Bible

The law and Jewish doctrine, customs and culture.

He would have known the classics of Jewish literature,

History, art and music.

The New Testament gave him two names:

In Hebrew he was Sh'a'ul which we would recognize as Saul

And in Greek/Roman he was Pavlos

In English, he was Paul.

You may see it either way in the New Testament.

We first meet Paul at the scene of a terribly brutal and bloody murder.

The first deacon of the Christian Church was Stephen.
 He was captured and executed for his Christian beliefs
 His death was by stoning.
 A ghastly process
 In which the victim is placed with hands bound behind
 In a backfilled hole, waist deep.
 While his accusers threw rocks at him.
 The rocks flew until the victim no longer had any sign of life
 Leaving a pulposus bloody mash of flesh.
 It could take hours.

By his own later admission Paul was there.
 He held the coats of those who cast the rocks.
 Today we might label him an accomplice.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was a member of the
 Pharisee Sect
 Of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem.
 He zealously adhered to their practices, discipline and law.

In his early life
 Paul drew the acclaim and admiration
 Of temple officials and the Pharisees
 For his ruthless capture and arrest of Christians
 Men, women and children,
 Who were imprisoned and even killed for their beliefs
 And associations.

Paul was favored with a commission from the Temple authorities
 to find Christians
 and drag them to their imprisonment
 and execution.

Among the Christians of the day,
 Paul was feared and avoided at all costs.
 His reputation as a hater of Christians and Christianity
 Was wide spread from Jerusalem to Damascus.

Paul had seemingly exhausted his leads on Christians in Jerusalem
And petitioned the Temple authorities for a license
To travel to Damascus
Where Paul learned many Christians had fled
To escape him,
To capture them and return them to Jerusalem.

It would be said of Paul today that he was on a Jihad
To capture and to kill Christians.
We would easily have branded him a terrorist.

It was on this mission that Paul encountered Christ.

It was some 4 to 7 years after Jesus had ascended to the Father
When Paul was in his late 20s or early 30s,
somewhere on the road
between Jerusalem and Damascus
that Paul's life was dramatically and radically changed.

You just heard and know the story.
Paul and his entourage were traveling in broad daylight
When, without warning a great blinding light
So powerful that Paul was knocked from his mount
to the ground.
When he recovered his breath
Paul looked and saw Jesus.

Calling him by his Hebrew name
Jesus issued His indictment:
"Saul, Saul. Why persecutest thou me?"
When he had regained his breath
Paul did not respond or enter a plea
(how could there have any but 'guilty').
Instead, Paul asked:
"Who art thou Lord?"

Jesus told him, pulling no punches:

“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest”.

He consoled Paul

“It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks”.

Jesus alluded to the ox kicking against the goad,

A spiked stick used to herd the oxen.

It is hard to oppose the will of God

You accomplish nothing

and only inflict harm on yourself.

Paul offered no defense, no denial

No explanation

No excuse;

and submitted himself:

Trembling and astonished

“What would you have me do?”

Jesus gave Paul his instructions

Paul was blinded and he fasted for 3 days (another theophany?)

And he was led to Damascus to be found by Ananias

On the street called Straight in the house of Judas.

Ananias removed the scales from his eyes with his touch

And Paul’s vision was restored.

We can only imagine what transformation took place

During those 3 days of blindness.

What scenes of Paul’s earlier life of oppression

Replayed in his mind.

Jesus defined the mission He had created for Paul
He was to be “a chosen vessel unto Me
To bear My name before the Gentiles and kings
And the children of Israel
For I will shew him how great things he must suffer
For My name’s sake.”

And it was done.
The terrorist had become an evangelist.

Paul spent the next 40 years of his life
Dedicated to his mission.
Suffering for Jesus’ name sake
And dying a martyr in Rome
some 44 to 47 years later
At the hand of Nero’s swordsman;
The execution of a Roman citizen.

In those 40 years Paul established churches throughout the
Mediterranean world.
He suffered hardship, cold, hunger and thirst.
He was threatened, brutally beaten,
Imprisoned multiple times, tortured.
He was shipwrecked and floundering in the sea three times

Quite a story
Quite a life
Quite a conversion.

Remarkable how God works.
In Paul he took the very worst.
And turned it into the very best.

Paul’s Conversion is celebrated to demonstrate the power of God
in our lives.

In the case of Paul, there can be no mistake
 No confusion
 No obfuscation.
God began with an intelligent, well-educated man
 Devoted to destruction
 Injury, mayhem.
And turned him into a man of compassion
 Devoted to the very person he had sought to destroy.

There can be no doubt that the conversion was of God
 Not man.
That the works of that man were the works of God
 Inspired by God
 Guided by God.

He does the same with His clergy.
 He calls them to the ministry
 He changes them at ordination.
 He inspires them
 Guides them.

He does the same with you.
From baptism
 From confirmation
 From the Eucharist that we will have this very day.

You are changed.
 Converted.

Pray to God none of us will ever know the adversities
 that Paul knew.
 However, the same Holy Spirit resides in you.

What will you do with it this afternoon?

Tomorrow?

This week?

Both within these doors

In God's little miracle church

and outside of these doors

in a world substantially ruled by the evil.

The Pre-Lenten season begins in just 7 days.

Lent begins in 24 days on Ash Wednesday February 18th.

Easter on April 5th.

God Be With Us.

