

## 20120122 Conversion of St Paul

I was checking out sermons on the Conversion of St Paul last week and came across this opening paragraph in a sermon:

*The conversion of St. Paul is one of the pivotal events in the rise of Christianity. Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul, one of the most zealous of the persecutors of the early Christians, becomes a Christian and an apostle himself and goes on to impact the world to a degree none of the other apostles achieved. By his travelling, preaching and teaching, he brought the Gospel of Christ into most of the Roman Empire, throughout modern-day Turkey, Greece, Italy, and perhaps even into Spain. Churches sprung up wherever he journeyed. And his letters to some of those congregations form the bulk of what you and I know as the New Testament. And as he was about the work of spreading the Faith abroad, he was also its chief defender at home in Jerusalem; putting down heresy and defending the freedom of the Christians according to the Gospel against those who wished to enslave them again under the Law.*

It made me think that in many of the sentences I could replace the name Paul with the name Pat and with a few other changes the paragraph could read:

*The arrival of Pat at St Paul's is one of the pivotal events in the rectorship of Fr Derek. Pat, whose ministry name was the Rev Pat, is one of the most zealous of the pastoral carers of the Anglican Church in Cape Town. She becomes an ordained deacon and later a priest and went on to impact the whole parish to a degree none of the other ministers achieved. By her travelling, preaching and teaching, she brought the Gospel of Christ into the hearts and minds of those in physical need and to whom she ministered throughout the Cape Peninsula. In her way of caring for others she demonstrated to the congregation the bulk of what we need to know about what the New Testament says about loving neighbour. And as she went about caring and spreading the Faith in the homes of the parish, she was also its chief carer here at the parish church and the soup kitchen at the Police Station across the road.*

Am I saying that the Rev Pat is the modern equivalent of St Paul and his conversion? Well, yes and no. No, in the sense that Paul's conversion left him blinded – when I last looked Pat could see, that he travelled all around the known world on his missionary journey – Pat is only going to Bonteheuwel, that he wrote letters that became theological discourses which theologians still use today to understand the Christian faith – Pat is only called upon to write sermons. But yes in the case that we, each and every one of us, are all, called to a conversion experience.

Today's festival is not a general festival commemorating Paul's life, nor is it commemorating his martyrdom. If it was I would be in red and not white vestments. This feast commemorates Paul's **conversion**. The unfortunate thing about Paul's conversion is that for many Christians it becomes the ideal model of what a conversion should be like. One commentator referred to Paul's conversion as a Grand Conversion - a thorough transformation. One thing I would like to emphasize is the distinction between conversion and change. All conversions always involve change, but not all change necessitates a conversion. Often Politicians are quick to change their position on an issue for purposes of political expediency, but that doesn't mean they have been converted to the reasoning or rationale behind their newfound position or have acquired a heart-felt-belief in it, either.

When it comes to faith, conversion is not like change. Conversion begins with a realization that a personal change is necessary, and then by an intentional decision, with God's help, we turn from one way of understanding... or knowing... or feeling... to another way, and soon we are thoroughly transformed. We don't just decide to take on a new attitude, but we ARE different people upon conversion. For Pat, next month will bring change to her life as she starts worshipping at the Church of the Resurrection, Bonteheuwel. It will be as much a change for her, as coming to St Paul's was four and three-quarter years ago, and I hope it will also be a **transformational** change for her, too. Her leaving here will bring about a transformation change to us left behind.

We have to recognise the need for this kind of transformative change and that it can come from a variety of sources – it can be like being hit over the head by a hammer, kind of what happened to Paul. It can be a result of an honest

assessment of our lives and recognizing that things are not right, or it can happen by our responding to the still-small-voice saying that God wants us to be right with Godself.

In the context of Christian faith, we undergo conversion, (with God's help) from that which is contrary to the reconciliation of us to God, to one another, and to all of God's creation. We turn away from the author of strife, confusion, and death and to the author of life, peace, and reconciliation.

There are other kinds of conversions that we are faced with day-in and day-out. These the commentator referred to as Petite Conversions. These are times we face everyday when we feel the pull back to the old ways and see in stark relief the old and the new. Petite conversions require the engagement in the process of deciding to turn from what we once habitually did in order to more fully orientate our actions... our thoughts... and our feelings to the new way. It is the continuing process of transformation, or in the Christian sense of being made **into** the image of Christ.

But we must realise that we are all in the midst of conversion, whether we like it or not. We will be transformed whether we make a decision to be or not. The question is, to what will we be converted? And how will we be transformed?

Paul was confronted by God and given the privilege of understanding that he was at the crossroad of his life – he was at the point of his own Grand Conversion. As we read the Bible, we recognize in Paul the many points of Petite Conversions he had to face and work through as his life in Christ continued. While our conversion and transformation will not likely be like Paul's, there will be many similarities as we face decisions of change of all types. Pat, that is what you will be facing at Bonteheuwel. Some of the things you learnt here will work there, some will not; they will have to be changed, converted and transformed. But my message for you, Pat and also for all of us here at St Paul's this morning is, as you read and hear the Word of God, listen to how Paul managed the struggles in his life and how he experienced the transformation that God worked within him, so that he knew well the life of peace and reconciliation that God offers.

So, people of St Paul's Rondebosch, have you experienced a Grand Conversion in your life in Christ? If you want to explore it more fully, won't you talk with one of the pray-ministers who will be in Lady Chapel as you come back from Communion this morning. Or make an appointment to see me after the service. We will be glad to walk with you through the process, as Saul became Paul, and as you are transformed.

If you have experienced such a thing, how are you doing with the Petite Conversions you face every day? How are you more fully living into the vows made at your baptism and taken on by you at your confirmation? Through your daily struggles and joys, where do you see God and how do you experience your relationship with God? The Holy Spirit is present with you always to aid in your transformation into the image of Christ. We, as the Body of Christ present at St. Paul's, are meant to be partners in the process.

One of the hymns we love to sing here is: *We have a gospel to proclaim*. Now, that statement is not wrong - so long as we acknowledge that, prior to that, we have to have a gospel to hear: to respond to and to be thankful for. And we have it because of the Conversion of St Paul and his consequent insight that Christ in you is the hope of glory. Finally, Pat, the choir in their anthem will sing an anthem by Elgar whose words are a message especially for you.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor: He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.*

So Pat, Go in Peace with the Spirit of the Lord upon you. Amen.