

20150125ConversionOfPaulSermon

Today is the feast of our patron saint, Paul. Today we commemorate the conversion of Saul. Conversion – such a loaded word. My master's thesis was looking at the history of the Anglican mission to the Muslims in Cape Town. "Was it successful?" people ask me, "How many were converted?" Can I ask you a question which hopefully, as this sermon progresses we might discover the answer. To what faith was Saul converted?

Of course the simple answer appears to be 'Christianity'. I wonder if Paul thought that; thought that he had been 'converted' from Judaism to another faith - Christianity?

Today, to say that Paul was converted to Christianity isn't particularly helpful. This is because there are a multitude of different definitions of 'Christianity' - and naturally each assumes that Paul would be converted to their particular version of 'Christianity'. I said my thesis was on the Anglican mission to the Muslims in Cape Town. Why Anglican only? What of the other missionary efforts by other denominations? Do we think that our Anglican way is better than others? So, are we saying that, because we like what Paul says and does, he must have been converted to a sort-of Anglican style of Christianity? Isn't this mere self-aggrandisement on our Anglican behalf?

Well, let's look at Saul/Paul's conversion in a bit more detail and not try to jump across centuries to the start of Anglicanism or even Anglicanism to day. We could narrow his conversion down a bit, to suggest that he was converted from a religion based on a fallacious efficacy of animal sacrifices to forgive sins, to a religion based on the truth of the eternal efficacy of the atoning death of Jesus on the Cross for the sins of all who believe in Jesus. Yes, filled with good theological jargon, but both of these religious bases entirely concerned with the self, the ego. They are both all about the forgiveness of **MY** sins, **MY** relationship with the divine, **MY** eternal salvation. They are both essentially selfish and narcissistic.

Now, we can all see that Saul **did** show selfishness and narcissism. He had a complete disregard for the feelings of others and even other people's lives which led to an active persecution of others, which we read about in the beginning chapters of the Book of Acts.

Saul, on the road to Damascus to continue his persecution of Christians, is confronted by the Lord, who says that he is persecuting the Lord by his actions. Saul is offered on that road to Damascus an opportunity to change, to be converted from a selfish understanding of God to a selfless one.

If Jesus died on the Cross to change us from worshipping one deity for selfish purposes to worshipping another deity for selfish purposes – nothing much has changed, nothing has been converted. The world is not any better off. If Jesus died on the Cross so that we might - finally - use the correct name for the deity – addressing God now Abba Father, then this deity is simply pedantic and not worth worshipping.

Saul goes into Damascus and his blindness is healed by Ananias. Luke, the author of the book of Acts and a great friend of Paul (he went on missionary journey's with him) describes Ananias as having a Jewish heritage. Not only does Paul acknowledge his own Jewish heritage, but says of Ananias, that he 'was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there'. Both Paul and Ananias descend from the same spiritual ancestry - Judaism. So, my question still remains - was Paul converted from something to something else?

Paul's conversion is not so much a moving away from Judaism, but rather moving away from Judaism practiced selfishly. In fact I would like to think that Paul's conversion also criticises 'Christianity' practiced selfishly, and every religion practiced selfishly. Still fresh in our minds are those religious fanatics who selfishly kill and kidnap others as in France and Nigeria.

Paul's conversion tells us that any practice of faith, spirituality or religion which divides the world into cliques, disregarding other people, their feelings, insights and inherent dignity, disengaging from the world and society, is to persecute the Lord himself – "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads."

It is as likely that Judaism can be practiced as unselfishly as 'Christianity' can.

So when Paul writes in Galatians that he didn't bother to confer with any of the existing church leaders following his conversion, Paul is saying that the simplicity of selfless religion is enough – there is no need for him to find out from Peter or the crowd in Jerusalem what he should be doing and how he should be doing it. It is the selflessness that is

important, not the intricacies of the religion. Saul / Paul didn't see his conversion to be from a false faith to a true one, but from a religion motivated by selfishness to one empowered by selflessness.

Selfishness is always the result of fear, fear of alienation and condemnation. This fear can only be neutralised by the opposites: affirmation and inclusion, unconditional affirmation and inclusion, unconditional love. Any dilution of unconditionality lets the possibility of fear and selfishness to sneak in.

So selfishness is overcome by incarnation, that preparedness of Jesus to sit down and eat with one and with all, to accept the offerings of saint and sinner alike. And we, like Paul, are chosen to do likewise - to go into all the world - to sit down and eat with all - to accept the offerings of one and all, without hesitation, without discrimination and without expectation.

What has happened however is that where the Church should be leading the way in this, it is the world that is far better than the church in doing this - accepting the dignity of others on a completely non-sectarian basis. But this accepting of all regardless of who how and what they are, is what we have been called to do. It is to this that we are, like Saul, converted. We should be attempting to create a society less riven by divisions and we do this to witness to the truth of the one God. We do this so that we ourselves are part of the solution, not the chief obstacle to be overcome.

And this we are called to do, it is not an optional extra that we might (or might not) do after receiving Holy Communion and being sent out **'to love and serve the Lord'**. Perhaps our Holy Communion service is in itself the classic example of sitting down and eating with others, all others, without hesitation, without discrimination and without expectation. But it can so easily become merely a sop to satisfy our fears of personal alienation and condemnation, to feed our selfishness and narcissism for another seven days.

We claim make that claim that our faith is incarnational. By this we mean that we go into the world and sit down and eat with all others without hesitation, without discrimination and without expectation. But are we welcoming enough to others here at St Paul's in Rondebosch? Do we have too many pre-conditions? 'You must become a member and sign up for pledge-giving, you must be confirmed, you must commit time and energy'. All good, important and essential thing but are they imposing too many conditions?

I commented at the beginning of this sermon about people who asked me about my thesis, asking how many Muslims were converted. I did not give my answer then but I will now. Put simply - 'not many'. But I want to justify this answer a bit more. At one time there were two missionaries working on either side of Cape Town - Archdeacon Thomas Fothergill Lightfoot at St Paul's Bree Street and the Rev John Mulhsen Arnold at St Mary's Woodstock. Both tasked with the **conversion** of Muslims to the Christian faith but both going about it such a different way. John Arnold printed pamphlets, supposedly by an Imam who had converted to Christianity but it was in fact written by Arnold himself - there was no Imam who converted at all. The pamphlet tried to deride the Muslim faith showing how Christianity was the only way. Across the City bowl was Archdeacon Lightfoot who through his own unselfish life, through his dedication to charitable causes for the poor - and most of the Muslims fell into that category - demonstrated that for him his world wasn't divided into cliques. He didn't disregarding people of other faiths but stood up for them in the City Council and Legislative Assembly of the Cape Colony. For him their feelings, insights and inherent dignity were just as important as that of the Christians. When he died, his biographer tells us, there were as many Muslim at his Funeral as there were Christians - all coming to pay their last respects to man who was unselfish, serving others without hesitation, without discrimination and without expectation.

The conversion we need to undergo and which we should bring to others, as Jesus brought to Saul/Paul, is a conversion from an ego centred selfish faith to an acknowledgment that we must be as unselfish in our lives as Jesus was in his and we must create a community based on this unselfishness.