

## **Conversion of St Paul**

**Brookton & Edward's Crossing, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2024**

The story of St Paul's conversion can be almost too much to comprehend, not only by virtue of the dramatic event itself, but in the transformation the conversion makes in both Saul's life and the history of humanity. In learning about Saul's experience, and his subsequent ministry as St Paul, we might ponder how our journey of faith and ministry could ever compare with his; this man who so wonderfully evangelised through his extensive journeys of the "so called" known world, and his letters to the faithful people "Of the Way", spread as a diaspora of small faith communities throughout that known world. Ultimately, he becomes recognised as one of the most significant figures in the history of humanity, by laying those foundations for the growth and expansion of Christianity.

We would do well to recognise that comparisons can at times, be unhelpful, even odorous. We might wonder about the likelihood of God calling you, me, or anyone, to be another St Paul? Or might that be the kind of thought which suggests an overly grand sense of our own importance, as well as an unwillingness to be open to, and guided by, the promptings of the Holy Spirit!

Let us remind ourselves of whom Saul, who becomes St Paul, is; in so many ways a remarkable figure. Saul was a zealous follower of God. He had come down from Turkey to Jerusalem to study at the feet of the greatest rabbi of the age, Gamaliel. As a young man, he had such zeal to keep the community of Israel together, that he made it his mission to try to stomp out the heretical sect that was dividing Judaism, and to his mind, blasphemously claiming that a carpenter from Nazareth was not only the Messiah, but the Son of God, and that he would destroy the holy Temple. For these reasons Saul was hunting, very enthusiastically, these "people of the Way". In that way Saul's persecution of the Church was not as was Herod's who in hunting down the baby Jesus wished only to preserve his own privileges. Saul's conversion occurs along a road which would have been a major thoroughfare, not least for traders. He

was travelling with a special mission, sanctioned by other Jewish leaders of Jerusalem. For these men, Saul was undertaking what they believed earnestly to be God's work. Everything about Saul suggests he was a zealous follower of, and advocate for, God.

What Saul had not grasped or realised was that this God he so fervently worshipped and advocated for, had moved on in his revelation of himself to humanity. However, instead of castigating Saul, and abandoning him as an outcast, God wants to use Saul's background, his abilities, his knowledge, and his zeal, to proclaim the Good News which is Jesus Christ! Can you not think of people who, having been persuaded from one belief or action, to another, become great zealots for their newfound understandings. I recall a friend of mine, whom when I was a young adult, was a "change smoker" of "roll your own" cigarettes— no sooner was a cigarette finished than a newly rolled one replaced it. And this friend had only one lung! Despite our gibes and advice, there was no impact on his attitude and actions until one day a specialist said to him that he would live a very short life if he continued as he was. He changed immediately and dramatically so! It is possibly fair to say that he became almost too much of a zealot – ranting and raving about the evils of smoking to any, and all, people.

Thereby as we celebrate today, Saul's conversion, let us reflect upon and consider our own Christian journey, and ponder whether there might be need for conversion, and refreshment in our journey as there was in Saul's. Might we give thanks to God that amongst our gathering there are none who need convert from a wicked life of sin, debauchery, malevolence, and sadism. However, might it be that we need convert from a defective notion of the Christian life: some Christians are minimalists, coming to church "when they can," praying when they have accomplished everything else that was really "important" to do and still have the energy, and keeping the commandments "as best they can" without being "fanatical" about never breaking them. Similarly, many of us can be legalists, thinking that if we "pray, pay and obey," that is all the Lord asks. If we fast two days a year, do not eat meat on the Fridays of Lent, avoid mortal sins, then we're setting ourselves up for the eternal hall of faith. We can live a Christianity without a Cross, seeking the good life of pleasure, money, power, and control, without

minimally sacrificing ourselves or things for God and others. Others of us could be Gnostics, thinking that as long as we “know” the truth, then we do not have really to live it. Others are similar to St. Paul in his Pharisaical days, thinking that all that really matters is our own action. Others might think they can live the faith all on their own, without the other members of the Christian community, without a real familial love of neighbour. Others can think that all God wants of us is personal piety, without our imitating St Paul in trying to spread the Gospel to all we know. There might be many examples, but the point is that many of us, while not necessarily living bad lives, are not living necessarily by faith in the Son of God, we’re not crucifying ourselves to the world, and the world to ourselves, we’re not seeking to become perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect, we’re not even making an effort to receive God’s grace truly to embody the beatitudes. Many of us need to be converted from what might be thought of as a defective notion of the spiritual life, of God’s will and hopes for us, to a true one. The Conversion of St Paul is a day in which we’re called to enter more deeply into Christ’s death and live a new life. It’s a day in which we can learn how to live far more deeply by faith in the Son of God who loves us and gives his life for us.

Today is a day in which we pray for the conversion of so many who persecute Christ without even knowing it, those who are caught up in sins for which he was crucified, those who are persecuting his body and making martyrs across the globe. It’s a day for us to pray for our own conversion from any shallow or deficient understanding of the holy life to which God is calling us. It’s a day in which we pray for the grace, like St. Paul, to be so converted that we will say, “Woe to me” if I do not share this gift!

Therefore, let us rejoice that the people of Edward’s Crossing long ago decided to dedicate their little Church in their nascent community, to someone who had in his own time made such a difference, but who still today stands constantly as a reminder of how we might live out our own lives and ministry in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in that same small locality.