

At the last Rugby World Cup, Dan Carter of the New Zealand national team, who incidentally is reported to be a Christian, became one of the most successful rugby players ever as he kicked faultlessly penalty after penalty and conversion after conversion. When interviewed afterwards he was asked if he had any tips for young players. He said; “dedication”. At the age of 6 he had built a rugby goal in the small garden of his house and kicked at goal, shooting small conversion after conversion. I believe that Christianity is no different, a series of small conversions.

Sometimes Christian conversion can sound like a grand affair. For some it excites, for others it daunts. But on a basic level, Conversion is that moment when God moves us to recognise the error of our past and commit to making a better future, starting with our own behaviour. This is the moment when we stop blaming others and start changing ourselves. Conversion is central to the Christian notion because to be a Christian is to be committed to want to change constantly so that the mistakes and misjudgements of yesterday may not determine the world of tomorrow. To be a Christian is to want to change the world for the better. We experience conversion when our eyes are properly opened and, void of the film which distorts, we see the world in a transformed light. This is what it is to live life in the resurrection.

On the face of it, St Paul has a huge conversion experience. On the Damascus road his life is certainly transformed for the better. From this moment on Paul embraces the challenge with open arms.

The story of St Peter, on the other hand, is far less of a grand conversion and more a story of multiple small conversions. At his first meeting with Jesus, as he is called out of his fishing boat, Peter is certainly captivated and all too eager to become a disciple, but as the story unfolds, failure after failure mature and condition Peter's expectations. At first Peter begins with shallow hero worship of a Jesus who is doing wonderful things, and he expects Jesus to do everything for him. Then, following what feels like an endless number of painful learning experiences, he finds himself standing on a seashore with the resurrected Jesus and is almost ready to stride out and take responsibility upon himself for building up the Church. As we hear about Peter's journey throughout the Gospels we can see that each painstaking misjudgement and error is in itself a small conversion experience and slowly they form Peter into the person Christ needs him to be. On the seashore we see this work almost complete. Peter is to feed Jesus' sheep and be the rock on which the church is built. From this moment forward Peter embraces the challenge with open arms.

For many of us, Peter's story may well resonate. The world bats us back and forward. We have moments of spiritual elation but more often struggle. We make mistakes, misjudgements, do wrong by others, just as they do wrong by us. But ours isn't the blame game, it's the growth game. We have had a wonderful example of what it means to overcome the negative things that life can throw in our way this week. The Archbishop, being confronted publically with the realisation that his true

father wasn't who he thought it was and instead was a man his mother had a drunken affair with, Justin Welby did not lash out, he did not denounce, he simply accepted it with the grace he has become so well known for and saw in it an opportunity to reach out to the hundreds of millions who find themselves in the same predicament. If you haven't already, I invite you to seek out the Archbishop's responses to these recent revelations. Ours is not the blame game, it is the growth game. Nonetheless, it can be hard and lessons difficult to learn. It is not always easy to bounce back up.

Following the rugby world cup final, a commentator revealed how Dan Carter came to be so good. He said that every year from the age of 6 Dan would increase the distance of his kicking by 5 meters. When the garden became too small he simply went around the front of the house and kicked from the other side of the road and over the house towards the goal. Occasionally he would go through a patch where he never seemed to be able to get the ball through at all, or, in his teenage years, he would get bored and drift away from it. But he always returned after a short absence. He felt the key was persevering when it felt boring or became a struggle.

Now I am not suggesting that we should all erect the spiritual equivalent of full size rugby goals in our back gardens - I am not even sure what the spiritual equivalent might be. Except to say that life is our practice ground. We will miss the goal. We will get bored or fail to see the point from time to time. But what matters is our perseverance even if it feels

like a struggle. For us as Christians, each life experience is a small conversion moment if we allow it to open our eyes and use it to propel us on to what needs doing next for the good of God's kingdom and his people.

The final and most telling thing Dan Carter had to say, was when asked about the secret to his success and what he would do beyond retirement. He responded "I cannot consider myself successful until I have breathed my last breath and looking back at my life say I gave everything to change the world for the better. Life is more than Rugby. I guess I will just have to grasp the next opportunity with open arms."

The thing that connects the examples of St Paul, St Peter and Dan Carter (I am not advocating Dan Carter for sainthood just yet) is their clear determination to keep moving forward and giving their all to build a better world, in spite of the setbacks along the way. They refuse to rest on the successes of their past and keep working to build a better future, no matter how challenging.

Let us pray that God may inspire each of us with the attitude to recognise each life-challenge as a mini conversion. Let us pray for the same determination to undertake what God has in store for us. Let us pray for the same bravery to respond positively to new opportunities as they arise. All this, for the furtherance of God's kingdom, the future of his Church and the betterment of our world. Amen