

Bristol Cathedral Eucharist
The Conversion of St Paul – January 25th 2015
Canon Bruce Saunders
Canon Emeritus Southwark Cathedral

I'm most grateful to the Dean for the privilege of preaching in this beautiful Cathedral where I was ordained in 1971. Today the Church celebrates the Conversion of St Paul, which I'd like you to think of as the major landmark in the life of the early Christian Church and indeed a major landmark in the history of the Christian faith ever since.

Now whatever you might think about St Paul – (and you probably do!) - cantankerous, convoluted, anti-women etc, we have to recognise him as the first real Christian theologian. Rather like the young Stephen Hawking gazing for days at blackboards covered with figures and then saying 'Aaah!', Paul reflected on the stories, the sayings and the rumours about Jesus of Nazareth that had come his way – remember that he never met him in the flesh – and he said 'I think I understand what this man's life and death means'. Paul left the narrative version of Jesus' life to others, while he used his considerable intellect to put into theological words the impact of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. What it amounted to. Like Steven Hawking's, Paul's conclusion was cosmic, enormous in its scope. Paul broadcast his discovery around the Roman Empire and it influenced the way the Gospel writers later came to tell their stories – for remember, although the letters of Paul in our bibles come after the Gospels, his letters were nearly all written before the Gospels appeared.

So the Conversion of St Paul was of great historic importance. That's not just my opinion. Paul thought so himself! He tells the story of his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus twice in his surviving letters and he makes sure that it is re-told three times in the Acts of the Apostles. The small differences between these versions suggest that the story was in wide circulation at the time. And rightly so.

Caravaggio, Rubens and others picture it as a single dramatic moment (and the New Testament accounts do the same) – the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls him 'once at a crash Paul'. But I think the profound changing of heart of this persecutor of the Church was more likely a slow-motion collapse of everything Paul knew. His education as a scholarly Jew, his loyalty to tradition, his family culture, his considerable reputation, his understanding of the purposes of God which had justified his witch-hunting of Christians, all came crashing down. Blind and lost, he had to be led gently into a new and unfamiliar way of being. A contemporary parallel? Richard Dawkins becoming a Methodist maybe, or the Dean of Bristol voting for UKIP.

What exploded Paul's former life was the dawning realisation that the old ways of being a righteous person, (trying to keep the Commandments and the Law) was based on a misunderstanding of the ways of God. And as he later explains, it never worked anyway. The more you try to keep the rules, the more guilty and ashamed you become when you fail, and the more depressed and further from God you get. In the Jesus story, Paul saw that our reconciliation to God was achieved by God's self-giving on the Cross: God's initiative not ours. Paul called it 'Grace'. The new Resurrection life that we enjoy in Christ is God's gift, not our reward. God loves us, Paul explains, not because we're nice, or lovable, or even good, but because God chooses to do so. And God's freely given gift is therefore available not just to the deserving, but to everyone, Jew, Gentile, male, female, slave and free.

This really was a thunderbolt with the power to destroy all those old social and religious divisions. So it's no coincidence that we commemorate the Conversion of St Paul at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; or that it occurs towards the end of the Church's Epiphany season – for if the Conversion of St Paul is not part of God's self-manifestation to the Gentile world, I don't know what is!). And in times like ours, we have to grasp that the wideness of God's grace is wider even than the boundaries of the Christian world. In today's Gospel story – Peter asks Jesus '*What will we get for all the sacrifices we've made for you?*'. Jesus seems to promise them proportionate rewards – thrones in heaven and a hundred-fold return – but that would be the old way of accounting. It may be because of Paul's

influence that Matthew records Jesus' cryptic proviso – but don't count on it, Peter. *'In the kingdom many who are last will be first'*. God doesn't behave according to our rules of wages and rewards.

It's still a radical message, so different from the way of the world. We calculate someone's worth by what they earn or what they have achieved. In the General Election run-up, listen out from all parties for expressions like 'hard working families' - the current version of the Dickensian notion of 'the deserving poor', who, by virtue of misfortunes not of their own making, have fallen on hard times. Society should look after them. But we have, by implication, no social obligation to the undeserving poor, those who have already fallen off the bottom of the social ladder and who have no boot-straps to pull themselves up by. Similar conversations, but on a larger scale, have no doubt been going on at Davos this week. That makes for popular politics, because many of us deep down – or maybe not so deep down – share that view. But Paul wouldn't vote that way. That's not the way of grace. And that's (fortunately) not the way God deals with us.

Fortunately God is anything but fair with us, but pours on us 'more than we can either desire or deserve' but old attitudes die hard, and few of us are truly converted to the doctrine of grace.

Those of us who think that salvation is something we can do for ourselves by trying, will find it hard to accept God's grace. To dismantle the defensive fortifications we have spent a lifetime constructing, to crawl out of our shell, like a naked tortoise, is, understandably, more than most of us will willingly do. So in the end we have to be painfully stripped of youth, beauty, strength, skill, reputation, health, love, companionship, before we can know the real security of simply being held in the loving hands of God. If we're lucky, we might just make it to that point before we die, but how much better if we could do it now, willingly and gratefully.

I hear you thinking *'So it doesn't really matter what kind of life we live, God will love us anyway'*. Well, the short answer is 'Yes, God will love us anyway'. But as Paul would say, it still matters how we live – not in order to score points, but to demonstrate this new freedom, this new life in Christ that is ours once we accept God's gift of grace.

But I don't expect you to believe a word I've said this morning. It's too much to expect people like us to become converted. Instead of the joyful freedom that Paul discovered, we'll just slog on, dull-eyed and dutiful, wondering why faith and church are such a chore.

But just in case there may be someone here this morning who might actually want their life to change, let me leave you with this. You've heard of Liberation Theology? This is Monkey and Cat Theology. When a baby monkey is in danger, it clings to its mother's back as she swings through the trees. If it falls, it's because it wasn't strong enough to hold on. When a kitten, is in danger, the mother cat picks it up in her teeth and carries it to safety. The kitten's salvation depends on its mother's strength, not its own. There are plenty of Christian versions of monkey theology. But St Paul was a 'cat theology' person – urging us to put our faith in the strength of God's teeth.

And one final thought: Paul didn't just snuggle up in his new awareness of God's love. God's grace was for everyone, so everyone should know about it and he made a good job of shouting it around the world. Now it's the job of people like us who may in the process of conversion, not just to enjoy grace but to share it. This coming week, that might mean something as simple as a kind word to a stranger, a brave apology at work, an unnecessary phone call to a friend, or an email to your entire address-book about how precious it is to you to know that you are loved by God. Or maybe something even more adventurous!

The Grace of the Lord be with you all. Amen