

Conversion

Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle (transf.), January 27, 2021

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Paul said to King Agrippa, "Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities. With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles~ to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me." Acts 26:9-21

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me. Galatians 1:11-24

My early Christian faith was nurtured in Protestant Evangelicalism, and my faith today continues to have roots that gratefully go deep into that Evangelical soil. I know others whose experiences of Evangelicalism have been traumatic and disturbing, and still others who no longer call themselves Christians because of the rigidity and shame they experienced as Evangelicals, and still others who gratefully remain within the Evangelical fold and whose faith I respect and honor.

I start with this backdrop on this commemoration of the Conversion of St. Paul because Evangelicals place a unique emphasis on conversion. In fact, an indispensable question among many Evangelicals is, "When were you saved?" The questioner is asking for more than a date and may be hoping to hear a heart-stopping conversion story. The first verse of one of our culture's best-known hymns provides both an example of dramatic conversion and an evangelical template for it:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

That verse sounds like the Cliff Notes version of the testimony that Paul gives to King Agrippa in the first reading for this mass. And many Evangelicals I have known love to trade stories along these lines, describing how in the twinkling of an eye they dramatically came to Christ.

Please don't think I'm mocking here. In fact, allow me to point out that you and I will make a confession of faith with corresponding themes in the Canon of the Mass this evening: "*We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.*" (Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer B, p. 368) Thanks be to God!

If you're not quite yet sure where I'm going with this message, it may be partly because I am reviewing my own experiences and thoughts of Christian conversion. I'm doing so in part for the benefit of any of you whose relationship to conversion is similarly complicated. I'm guessing our perspectives differ enough, though, that we may best benefit here not from one main point but from a few diverse observations.

Let me first address any of you who have experienced a dramatic conversion to faith in Christ, and let me say, *Thanks be to God!* And to that I also add, *Don't tell me; show me!* The most genuine evidence of one's conversion of life in Christ is not how breathtaking one's conversion story *was* but the conversion of life to which one is giving witness in the here and now, maybe out on some main stage but likely more often in ways that are mundane and out of public view in the day in and day out moments and choices of life.

I also have a message for those who do *not* have a dramatic conversion story to tell. Some of you may feel envy at others whose stories are more riveting. Some of you may have been shamed by others. You've been told that you can't be a *real* Christian without a *real* story. If you're in this category, I encourage you to find a cliff, one from the bottom of which nothing can be retrieved, and push all of that shame over the edge. Your story and your life may be no less holy, just because your script wasn't written by Cecile B. DeMille and doesn't sound up to the testimony of St. Paul.

Even Paul's own account, over time, is less and less focused on the drama of the conversion itself and more and more focused on the work and call of God in the present. In our first reading this evening, from Acts, Paul speaks boldly to King Agrippa of his conversion, but his version of the story is actually less dramatic – not more – than the prior account in Acts, many chapters before. (Acts 9:1-22) By the time Paul authored his letter to the Galatians, from which our second reading is taken, the story is further distilled. He wants the reader to mainly see God's hand at work, through him, in the present: "*God ... set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, [and] was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*" His conversion story diminishes as the work of conversion in him grows in his living and sharing of the gospel.

Paul's example gives rise to a question for all, both those who have a dramatic conversion story and those whose conversion may seem more hidden and incremental. The question is not about some conversion that did or did not take place in the past. The question is about the conversion of life that God in Christ is seeking in you or me now. Is there some way you have recently been *delivered ... from evil?* Is there some way that you have recently been able to see yourself as *worthy to stand before your God?* How and where and for what reason have you been or are you being "*brought out of error into truth, or out of sin into righteousness, or out of death into life?*" **Amen.**