You may have been accosted in Lion’s Yard by an earnest man, asking if you are saved. If you engage and sound positive, his next question is often ‘when were you saved?’

He means, ‘are you Christian?’ And then, ‘when did you become a Christian?’ But the way he asks those questions makes some very particular assumptions about what it is to be Christian, and what it is to have become one. The story of St Paul’s conversion plays very strongly into that way of thinking.

That story is dramatic. The most notorious persecutor of the early Church is hurled to the ground, blinded by divine light, and directly challenged by Jesus. Within days he has been baptised, and is on his way to becoming one of the most vigorous and effective missionaries the Church has ever known. The ‘Damascus road moment’ has entered into the language as a phrase most people recognise.

Paul’s Damascus road experience was not only dramatic, it was pretty much immediate in its effects on what he believed. It was a conversion in the simplest and most profound way. But this is not the whole of what we mean by ‘conversion’. Far from it.

Some Christians can indeed recall a particular conversion moment, a specific experience. Many more, though, have had a much more diffuse sense of coming to believe what they believe. Their views, their sense of commitment, have changed gradually, over time.

This variety reflects a vital truth about what it is to be a Christian. Christian life is fundamentally dynamic, not static. It is more fluid than rigid. The way we understand what it is to be a Christian, the things we believe, the things we say, the things we do or refrain from doing – all these change over time, they ebb and flow. And this can mean we experience moments, even periods, of doubt; maybe crippling doubt. But that is why we speak of faith. Doubt is the corollary of faith, not its opposite.

The life of faith is also going to be marked by our falling-short, getting things wrong: maybe even getting things very wrong, doing really quite bad things. And so we have to turn back to God, we have to reach out in sorrow and ask to be hauled back to our feet.

All that suggests, then, that the life of a Christian is also marked by a continual need for conversion; by a continual self-awareness of our human failings. We just do need to keep turning back, because we keep turning away. Conversion is turning. And with God’s help, every turn back, every conversion, leads us deeper
into a binding relationship with God. He is the God of infinite patience and mercy, and our every conversion moment depends on that.

We should marvel at St Paul: at his spectacular conversion, and his spectacular contribution to the Church. But our own conversion, which is a life of conversion, and our own contribution, should be ours, not an attempt to match up to his. And even Paul knew his own limitations. He wrote to the church in Philippi about this:

*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 3.10-14*

This life, this pressing on towards that prize, is given energy and joy and hope by two things. One is that we don't do this alone: we share the road with others. And the other is that God is always there, because he loves us more than we dare ever imagine.