

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Conversion of Paul

The conversion of Paul is unusual among saints' days. He is the only person in the calendar of saints who was once a persecutor of the church; and he is also the only one who is referred to by one name in the Collect and another in the reading!

The turnaround for Saul was by all accounts very dramatic, and to this day people allude to it when they speak of a 'Damascus Road experience'. And Saul's life was certainly very different before and after the encounter with Christ. But it's edifying to look a little more closely at what actually happened. Note, for instance, that Saul didn't *immediately* transition from powerful persecutor to powerful preacher. Even this iconically instant conversion was something of a *journey* of faith. And while emphasis is drawn to Saul's inner vision, the story is not simply a matter of the inner workings of an individual.

Let's take it step by step. The first thing that happened was that Saul was deeply *disempowered*. Encountering Christ made him weak, blind and helpless. The first step in Saul's Christian journey was that he became hugely vulnerable.

This is a lesson we must not miss. Vulnerability and humility are often the very first steps in a genuine journey towards the true God. To put it another way, or say the very least, the good news of Christ doesn't always cheer people up, and never puffs them up! Saul was more or less paralyzed for three days.

This vulnerability and dependence is not incidental. For one thing it makes you encounter yourself in a new way. And, just as importantly, relationships with other people are reframed when we ourselves become vulnerable. This is what happens in step two, where our attention turns from Saul to Ananias. He's not the lead character in this story, but without him Saul is lost.

God's message to Ananias was simply this, 'Saul needs you'. But you can be sure that at this stage the last thing that Ananias thought *he* needed was Saul, the great and rightly feared opponent and persecutor of the church.

But somehow Ananias summoned up the courage to be obedient to what he had heard in prayer, overcame his fear and natural inhibition, and sought Saul out.

The story of Saul's conversion is a crucial one for our faith and an extraordinary one to hear and think about, with its miraculous visions and voices and the huge change in Saul's' life. But one tiny, human moment stands out as quite pivotal. Without *this* the whole course of Christian history would have been entirely different: Ananias entered the house where Saul was staying, put his hands on him and said 'Brother Saul'.

Luke adds more words, but in a way everything is in that tiny phrase 'Brother Saul ...'. Hearing it, Saul recovered his sight and was baptised.

If Ananias had not swallowed his fear and welcomed the persecutor with those words then that terrifying man may never have been baptized; many others would never have heard of Jesus; our New Testament, if we had one at all, would be completely different, and there might not even be a religion called Christianity.

It was very big moment for Saul – and for Ananias. Think of that next time you are challenged to reach out in friendship to a stranger who is hostile to you or your faith.

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