

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY 11:6:2023: GEOFF CHADWICK
OS10a SUNDAY BETWEEN 5 AND 11 JUNE:
ROM 4:13-25 PAUL'S CONVERSION"

To understand this morning's Epistle reading, context is everything.

Most of us are familiar with Paul's dramatic conversion to "The Way" of Christ. It's described three times in the book of Acts (9:1-19, 22:5-16 and 26:12-18). We know the story of him being confronted by bright-light and being challenged to turn from being a persecutor of the church to being its champion. Now what is sometimes forgotten, is that Paul took time out after his conversion experience to come to terms with what had happened. I think this is at odds with the "Sunday School" view of "nasty Saul" becoming "Champion Paul" in an instant.

Paul in his own letter of Galatians puts it like this:

13 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. ¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor 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.

18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; ¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

2 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up in response to a

revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. (Gal 1:13-2:2, NRSV)

As I understand it, Paul needed time to come to terms with his confronting vision. Whilst I know that instant conversion is possible, it seems to me that a long process is more the norm. Conversion takes time, especially where the changing of “one’s mind” is required. Perhaps it’s like adolescence. One does not suddenly become an adult after being a child. Adolescence is required. The body must mature, concrete thinking must become abstract, and childish ways must be abandoned. Even Paul himself says this in 1 Cor 13:

¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. (1 Cor 13:11-12, NRSV)

(Perhaps, this too, is a veiled reference to his conversion?)

The fruits of Paul’s maturing in Christ are his letters. Most notably it is in Romans where find his most profound thoughts. In the section of Romans we read today, we hear Paul’s struggle to reconcile his old strict understanding of the Jewish Law, with the more conciliatory view of the Christian “way.” His struggles are immense and significant. As Saul, (the Pharisee of Pharisees (Acts 23:6), he believed that “adherence to the religious Law” was the way to God. Whilst overly zealous, the view was understandable. For him, and others besides, following God’s laws was honouring God. Religion and Law went hand in hand.

Now there was a problem. The people of “The Way” (followers of Jesus) claimed they were honouring God without following the strictness of the Religious Law. Paul, as Saul could not fathom this. It took a visionary conversion and time away for him to come to terms with it.

What were the problems? Well, here’s few that he would have found offensive:

- The relaxation of food laws.
- Abandoning the necessity of circumcision.
- The drinking of blood (at least symbolically) at the Eucharist.
- That anyone hung from a tree is NOT accused of God, and is in fact, God.

The Letter to the Romans (and the others, of course) emerge out of his grappling with these problems. Today’s reading reveals his thinking. After years of contemplation, he looks back to the origins of his Jewish faith and has a brilliant revelation:

Abraham and Sarah the founders of the faith *pre-date* the Religious Law!

Abraham and Sarah were 400 hundred years before Moses and the Law, and they are venerated as faithful. “Faith” then is more foundational than law. Here’s how he expresses it:

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. (Rom 4:13-14)

Paul then points out that whilst Abraham’s faith was in the promises of God to be a great nation, for Christians:

It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Rom 4: 24b-25, NRSV)

This is Paul’s breakthrough point. Faith in the one who raised Jesus from the dead for our justification is everything! This is his conversion of mind.

Nevertheless, having realised this, he is well aware that freedom from the religious law, if abused, would lead to anarchy. Just as over zealous adherence to the law leads to oppression. In an other place he writes:

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,* but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal 5:12b-15, NRSV)*

We modern Christians owe a lot to that breakthrough conversion of Paul's thinking.

I wonder if you have ever had your own breakthrough thought or thoughts? Can you think of any changes of mind you've had. Maybe a few, maybe many...?

When I was about 15yo I thought Nuclear Energy would be the way of the future. Then a few years later in 1986, the Soviet Era Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor blew up showing just how dangerous such technology could be!

Since then, I have been an advocate for clean energy options.

Also, at the age of 16 I refused to read novels, telling my English teacher they "*were just made-up stories that had nothing to say about real life!*" You will be pleased to know I have since changed my mind!

So have you had any breakthrough thoughts? Changes of mind? Have a think...

O yes! Let's not forget that Paul was persuaded by the company he kept. Who is your company, and are they changing your mind from glory into glory?

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.