

*Preached by the Revd Professor Robert Gilbert, Fellows' Chaplain, on the Conversion of St Paul, Sunday 25 January 2015, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

Acts 9:1-20; Matthew 19:27-30

Today we celebrate the conversion of St Paul on the Damascus road. We celebrate a specific, historical event that probably occurred about the year 35, an event in which Paul encountered the risen Jesus in person. Paul's belief in this experience was central to the way he lived the rest of his life. Through the letters he wrote – or actually, mostly dictated – we hear a man who died in Rome about the year 66 *speaking* to us, telling us about his experience of meeting the risen Christ. Paul's conversion is among the strongest pieces of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, for the obvious reason that a man who was zealously persecuting the first followers of Christ, a man who was glad to see Stephen stoned, a man at whose feet the crowd that murdered Stephen lay down their cloaks, changed his story completely. Paul became *utterly* converted by his meeting with the living Jesus, the living Christ, on the road to Damascus. It turned around his life in an instant, just about, and he became eventually the Church's first great theologian.

The magnificence of Paul's vision of what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus mean for humankind cannot be underestimated. This vision led Paul to argue in his letters that the murdered rabbi Jesus was, in fact, *God with us*. Behind the magnificence of Paul's vision, indeed provoking that magnificence, lies the devastation of his conversion experience, the devastation of realising he had been catastrophically and cosmically wrong. This was a devastation which made his next step a disappearance into Arabia to spend years reflecting on what had happened to him and what it had shown him. In turn, Paul's experience coloured the way he came to understand what belief in Jesus Christ entails and promises and represents. Today, as we remember Paul's conversion, we should pause and think that it occurred in Syria, and remember the people of that country, Muslim, Christian and Jew – those who remain, and those who have fled. We should pause and think that when Paul says he went into "Arabia" he means somewhere east of Damascus, somewhere today that might be part of Jordan or Iraq. We should remember the displacement of individual Syrian people, families and whole communities that has occurred and is occurring now. We should remember that there have been Christian families in Syria since before Paul's own conversion – like the family of Ananias who we heard about in our first reading. Perhaps some of the people under attack now in Syria, or those who have had to flee, perhaps they are members of families that have been Christian since then.

One of the effects of reading Paul's various letters, written to different centres of Church life and also to individuals he knew like Philemon and Titus, is that it makes us think of him a bit like a contemporary of ours. He gives us details about himself – for example, commenting on the inelegance of his own handwriting compared to that of his secretary – and he speaks openly of a "thorn in the flesh", something which made life difficult for him, some kind of disability, though we don't know what it was. We hear his personal asides and we hear him being bad-tempered and argumentative. Hearing him again like this we engage with him on *his* level, and reading aloud his own personal thoughts we respond in kind. We want to argue *with* him, and because we want to argue with him in different ways depending on our starting point we start to argue with each other. We argue about the status of women in the Church, we argue about sexuality. Interestingly we don't argue about drink, though Paul clearly disapproved of people who get drunk, which sometimes makes me feel a little awkward. But anyway, we do Paul the honour, we do him the courtesy of treating him as if

he is a contemporary of ours, someone we should *be able* to argue with. Because Paul was a human being rather like us. Paul's heartfelt concerns map rather well onto the way we still live today.

First, Paul was someone who *required evidence*. He was an empiricist, someone who would not accept hearsay but required direct proof. You could say that Paul had a scientific point of view, his knowledge was based on data. Only due to his personal experience of the risen Jesus did he undergo the transformation which made him the man we remember now. And for Paul, the value of Christian belief relied entirely on Jesus's resurrection. Today, we are all empiricists, we need to be shown something before we believe it. Our educational system is built on the value of evidence, on testing our beliefs against the facts. Free-thinking is about working things out for yourself, on the evidence you have. Paul was a free-thinking person.

At the same time, Paul was *idealistic* and we, too, are idealists. We have a vision for how the world should be. The range of charitable activity that students in this college and across the university are involved with speaks to that – from teaching sexual health in China to helping with music lessons in schools in Oxford. Paul remained an idealist all his life, and the ideal for him remained the example of Jesus. At one point, he says to some of his correspondents (to paraphrase), “It's not about *me*; you aren't following *me*, or one of the other church leaders, you're following Jesus” – he always keeps his eyes fixed on that ideal. Paul was someone who, like us, valued friendship very highly. He is constantly referring to and asking after his friends. Paul loves his friends and doesn't mind showing it. He is unguarded in his expressions of concern for them. And Paul collected friends, much like people collect friends nowadays on Facebook or associates on LinkedIn. In his letter to the Romans, Paul rattles off a whole list of names of people he wants to be known as a friend of. Like getting friended by the friend of a friend on Facebook, Paul wants to link himself in with the leading members of the communities he wants to communicate with.

Like many of us, Paul also liked a *good argument*. He wasn't above raising his voice and he liked to try and argue things to a conclusion. Paul was also a practical man and a businessman – he was a tentmaker, and actually that was quite a middle class kind of job in Paul's day, maybe equivalent these days to the owner of a smartish car sales outlet or a property developer. Although he was an idealist, Paul understood the business of making money.

So, as someone requiring evidence, as someone with ideals, as someone who loved his friends, as someone who liked a good argument (and winning it), as someone who knew how to turn his hand to work and make money, Paul was like many people today. But he also presents us with some ideals for us to try and follow, and I want to point out two of them. First, the way he argued is a good model for the Church to use today. He was self-reflective, and he could acknowledge his mistakes. He even modified his beliefs in the light of experience and on the basis of argument. Although, as I say, he idealistically maintained his focus on Jesus, and although following his conversion Christ remained the primary reference point for the way he lived the rest of his life, Paul found that he had to change his second-level beliefs and he was honest about that. Our modern media outlets wouldn't treat them as second-level beliefs, mind you – but that just shows how they don't understand the point of Christianity. For example, Paul clearly changed his beliefs about *how* the transformation of creation begun with Jesus's resurrection would be concluded in the fullness of time – in other words he changed his views about the end of the world and the hope of eternal life.

Second, Paul was able to live cheerfully despite being unable to do exactly what he wanted, in his case despite being under house arrest in Rome at the end of his life. In the concluding lines of the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke (who of course had himself travelled with Paul) tells us how Paul lived cheerfully in Rome for two years at his own expense, receiving his friends and speaking openly about his beliefs.

We had none of Paul's own teaching read this morning. But in our Gospel we heard a teaching of Jesus which maps exactly onto the belief which Paul's devastating experience of conversion gave him. For me, perhaps the most beautiful of the many things that Paul wrote is that God takes what the world thinks nothing of and makes it the basis for the judgement of everything. Paul had known this turnaround in his own life through the devastation of his conversion. That God takes what the people in power take no notice of and makes it the standard against which they are themselves judged. As Jesus put it, "Many who are last will be first and the first last." God reveals his eternal wisdom in the foolishness of Christ and the foolishness of Jesus and his followers is wiser than all the so-called wisdom of the world. The other side of this – what we can do about it, and what Paul did in responding to this devastating realisation – is to forget ourselves, as Jesus also said in our Gospel this morning, following Christ and addressing the needs of others for all of our days. Amen.