

I don't know if you like going to pantomimes, but if you do, you have probably seen a version of Dick Whittington at some point. At any rate, you know the story. Dick was escaping from a dead-end job in London when he heard Bow Bells ringing, and felt they were saying 'Turn again Whittington, thrice mayor of London'. He turned back, made his fortune, and became Lord Mayor. Turning again was clearly the right thing to do. There is a street in London called Turn-Again Lane, and one in Oxford too, now incorporated into the Westgate Centre. The names may simply indicate a cul-de-sac, but they certainly have a resonance; and they are appropriate to today's celebration of the Conversion of St Paul.

Conversion comes from a Latin word meaning turning, turning round. In Christian tradition it usually refers to one of three things: the dramatic change that turned the zealous persecutor Saul into the missionary apostle and writer Paul; the change, whether dramatic or not, that brings ordinary people from unbelief to faith in Christ; and the change of allegiance that brings them from one faith to another (originally into the fold of the Catholic Church). Cardinal Newman, Saint John Henry Newman, famously experienced two of those conversions: an initial one as a teenager, when he had the revelation of 'two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator', and a second one, more intellectual, some twenty years later, when he came to believe that there could after all only be one Church.

Have you had a conversion? The question may be found indelicate or even offensive, for historical or personal reasons. Perhaps we should go back to the underlying idea of turning. The words that express this in the Bible, in both Greek and Hebrew, are less rigidly defined, while not being any less challenging than 'conversion', with all the baggage that that brings.

The Greek verb is *epistrepho*: *strepo* 'I turn', *epistrepho* 'I turn round', 'turn back', or 'return'. It occurs forty times in the New Testament. It is never applied to Paul, incidentally, nor is any other verb to do with turning, though it is to the Gentiles who received his message: even Barnabas, when persuading the terrified church in Jerusalem that Paul was now to be regarded as their friend, simply told them how he 'had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus'. The Hebrew word, often translated by *epistrepho* in the Greek version of the Old Testament, is *shuv*. It occurs over 1000 times, and it refers to all kinds of turning, particularly turning away and returning, in both a physical and a moral/religious sense.

Now returning is fine, but surely turning is a sign of weakness? Politicians' U-turns are mercilessly lampooned; Margaret Thatcher famously said 'The lady's not for turning.' In the Old Testament God's people frequently turn away from his commandments. Yet turning is something God does too, turning away from the punishment that his disobedient people were expecting, or actively turning it away, and showing them mercy instead. The beginning of Psalm 85 is a good example: 'Lord, thou hast turned away the captivity of Jacob. [...] Thou hast turned thyself from thy wrathful indignation.' Immediately afterwards the idea of turning is applied to God's people in a fresh way: 'Turn us then, O God our Saviour: and let thine anger cease from us.' The understanding of God as someone who actively turns brings the hope that we ourselves can be turned. There's a memorable verse in Jeremiah where the prophet prays simply: 'Turn me, O God, and I shall be turned' (31: 18). The Vulgate,

interestingly, has 'converte me, et convertar', so this is a kind of conversion: but the prayer is open-ended, for God may want to turn us in unexpected ways.

Today marks the culmination of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year the theme and the resources have been prepared by the Christian churches of the island of Malta, where St Paul was shipwrecked on his journey to Rome. The meditation for today is 'Conversion: changing our hearts and minds'. Just as the islanders changed their initial antagonism to Paul when they saw he was unharmed by the snake that crawled out of the fire, so [quote] 'our search for Christian unity and reconciliation [...] demands an ongoing conversion to Christ in which [we] learn to overcome [our] perception of the other as a threat.'

Paul himself had to learn totally new ways of relating to the other: Gentiles, women, everyone. From being a traditional exclusivist Pharisee, he came to understand the astonishing truth that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3: 28). He did indeed experience an initial dramatic turnaround, but it had to play out in a constant willingness to be turned, notably towards his fellow human beings. His new direction, following Christ, was to be unwavering, but that didn't preclude fresh revelations of the need to turn, for instance changing his evangelistic focus from Asia Minor to Europe. In this new year we may have made resolutions to hold firm to a good direction in life, but let's be ready and willing to turn in whatever ways God may be calling us to. Surely Christian discipleship is a constant process of allowing God to turn us away from our natural self-centredness, towards Christ and towards others. If you look on the penultimate page of this term's Chapel Services booklet, you will find a quotation from Newman: 'To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.' So 'turn me, O God, and I shall be turned.' Amen.