

Homily – Sunday 5th May; Acts 9: 1-6 and John 21: 1-19

The resurrection of Christ led to the most remarkable series of events in human history. Many of these events are recorded in Luke's book, the Acts of the Apostles. One of those stories that we have just heard read, is the story of St. Paul's conversion. Saul, who was a persecutor of Christians, is dramatically and suddenly converted to faith in Christ on the Damascus road and becomes Paul. And from that conversion came Paul's evangelism, epistles and so much theology that has made a deep impression upon the Church and the world..

But Paul has been a controversial, and not always liked, advocate of the Gospel. He did not have all the answers. There were times he said when it was like 'looking through smoked glass', but his own experience and the experience of millions of people through not just one century, but many, gave him the basis for such trust, such faith, to utter a firm 'Amen' to the promises of God, and make a confident decision that in God he would trust.

And the word decision here is important. For Paul the law of faith was a particular faith in the particular person of Jesus Christ; a person in whom he had not always had faith; indeed one whom he had specifically rejected. But then came that particular moment of transformation on the Damascus road. Paul, we know, was a man with a deep pride and faith in his Jewish ancestry and upbringing; he was a man deeply moved by Greek culture and philosophy, he was a citizen of an empire which had created the *Pax Romana* by faith in the civil institutions and armed might of Rome. But Paul, in that moment, put his ultimate faith in Jesus Christ. It was a moment that I am sure was shaped by all the years of faith experience and reflection that had gone before but, from that specific point of decision that here in this one life, the life of this man Jesus, really was focused that whole life and purpose of God, that whole meaning of human existence on which it is worth staking your own life and saying 'Amen – Yes' to that, from that decision and that conviction then flowed that extraordinary and breath-taking life of intense activity and equally intense suffering, which changed not only Paul, but (and it is not too extravagant to say this) changed so much in later human history, and not only here in the Western world.

That is because Paul saw so clearly that general conviction and particular decision about something which really can be trusted absolutely, and held to utterly seriously and without reserve, must have universal application as well. If something is true and worth staking life on

for one, then it has to be for all. You can't have an aircraft which is truly trustworthy for you and not also for me.

To have faith is not, as some would suggest, to shut down our critical faculty, to stop asking questions, or to retreat into a world of fantasy into which no thinking person would wish to go. The reality is that our human critical faculty can **only** operate on the basis of faith. So, a scientist will proceed with an experiment on the basis of what he or she believes to be true. They then submit that belief (based as it is on the observation and experience of their own and others) to critical questioning and experimentation. But the questioning is always secondary to what is first believed. As St Augustine said: '*Credo ut intelligam*' – '*I believe in order that I might understand*'; and I am sure that here he was recalling the older words of the prophet Isaiah who said (7/9) '*Unless you believe you will not understand*' or, perhaps a better translation: '*you will not endure*'. Without that secure underpinning framework of belief and faith, you'll be all over the place - as are so many people today.

Faith – it's not an end in itself, as it is sometimes made out to be. Rather it is entering into that relationship of trust that may lead to hope and to love. It is the starting point from which our thinking and our understanding begin. But not just thinking and understanding – which is just head stuff. Faith involves behaviour and action – life stuff, too. As one Classical scholar has put it: '*Faith is not just belief. Belief is passive. Faith is active.*' (Edith Hamilton). Faith is that steadfastness in belief which shapes character, which leads to action, and then remains committed to that action even when the final outcomes may not yet be seen. Like planting an acorn knowing that you will be dead before the oak tree is fully grown, acts of faith are also acts of deeply profound hope.

Without faith there can be no start to understanding, and so no meaning to life, and so no grounds for real hope. The only question for all of us is; where are the grounds for our faith to be found?