

Sermon Given by

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Acts 9:1-9 - "If him, anyone"

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I wonder whether you have heard about the two academics from Oxford in the eighteenth century, the poet Gilbert West and Lord Lyttleton. They were both determined to destroy the historical basis of the Christian faith: they were convinced, as they put it, that it was 'a tale gone mad'. So they set themselves each a challenge: Gilbert West was going to demonstrate that the resurrection of Jesus had never happened and Lord Lyttleton was going to prove that Saul of Tarsus had never been converted to Christianity.

But significantly, both men on examining the evidence came separately to the opposite conclusion of the one they had wanted to argue. They produced a book of their findings which you can still get hold of today, with very thorough research into the questions.

West was convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead and Lyttleton that Saul of Tarsus had encountered Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and had gone on to become the apostle Paul. So they did the honest thing and they became ardent followers of Jesus.

Lord Lyttleton writes: "The conversion and apostleship of Saint Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a Divine Revelation."

I wonder whether you give that status to the event we are considering today from Acts chapter 9. I can imagine that we might agree that the resurrection of Jesus is that pivotal – but is the conversion of Paul really that significant?

Interestingly Luke recounts the narrative of the conversion three times because it is hugely significant.

I suspect that we undervalue the story at least in part because the doctrine of conversion is not very popular today even in the church.

I have an elderly clergy-friend who was invited round to an Archdeacon's drink's party with lots of other vicars and he discovered that his host had been at the same University as he had. And all innocently he asked him: 'Was that where you were converted then?' A perfectly reasonable inquiry; but his question was met by some embarrassed spluttering.

What a shame that clergy don't really believe in conversion – when the Church of England has for centuries had an official feast day which celebrates conversion: the feast for the **conversion** of the Apostle Paul – January 25<sup>th</sup>. It's a Church of England doctrine, because it is a Bible doctrine.

This is important for the denomination. I was greatly helped when someone highlighted for me that the big issue is whether our gospel is a gospel of inclusion or transformation.

For many the gospel message is all about being inclusive – so as a matter of justice, pure and simple, the church must welcome and include everyone. Regardless of their creed or

their behaviour or their sexual orientation. Well – there is obviously some truth in that. We must be inclusive because Jesus invites all without distinction to his kingdom.

But he never leaves anyone where he finds them. The gospel is not about inclusion, pure and simple. It offers instead transformation as Jesus forgives us and liberates us.

Inevitably, this is a big issue personally as well. When I became a Christian at the age of 16, many people friends and family said: 'It's just a phase.' It's a popular way of describing Christian conversion, particular if it happens in teenage years: it's just a perverse form of teenage rebellion.

In my case my conversion coincided with a fascination with rockabilly music, complete with brylcreem hair, much to the annoyance of my poor mother who had to wash my pillowcase.

Well – that was a phase, but the Christian faith wasn't. That was a conversion: and I would encourage you not to view talk of conversion as extreme – something for the enthusiasts but not for you. It is mainstream Christianity and it opens the possibility to you for transformation and a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

Let's think about the conversion of Paul under two headings:

First, the person he was.

Verses 1-2 make clear the person he was:

***<sup>1</sup>Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.***

For a start at this point he is Saul, not Paul. If you are puzzled by the name, it was only changed later to Paul, which was a Latin name. Probably that was to make it easier to get on with Gentiles, which would have been unthinkable to him at this stage. Saul was Jewish to the core, and as such he was implacably opposed to Christianity.

That much is clear from the two previous mentions of him in Acts. In Chapter 7 at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the cloaks are laid at Saul's feet and he approves of the action others are taking. Then in Chapter 8, Saul is described as destroying the church, in language which was used of an animal attacking its prey.

I grew up on a farm and my mother had a statistic that for every one rat you saw there are nineteen that you don't: in other words they breed so fast that there must be drastic action to discourage them.

Paul would echo that at this stage about the Christians... 'keep the vermin in its place – better still kill them'. There is a hint of that in our chapter, because he is breathing out 'murderous' threats against them in verse 1.

Which takes his opposition to a new level. Now travelling house to house in Jerusalem is not enough. He is going to travel 100 miles to Damascus, just in case some Christians have slipped through his grasp.

There is to be no mercy – ‘men or women’ will be arrested. And if it needs authorisation from the top, fine. I imagine him setting off, patting his saddle bag with smug satisfaction because there inside is the crested paper of the high priest. What an honour to have this mission.

So off he goes to this Jewel in the desert, Damascus – but as the city comes into view, Saul doesn’t eye it as a tourist. Only one thing filled his vision: the Christians he was going to lock up and kill.

That is the person he was – a mind poisoned with prejudice and a heart filled with hatred. If you had suggested that he would leave Damascus a Christian, he would have laughed.

Why do I stress that? If I was to ask what caused Saul’s conversion, there is only one answer which fits. God himself... It would have been completely impossible for Saul in that condition ever to decide for Christ, given the person he was. The only way to become a Christian would be if God and Christ decided for him.

The same is true for all of us – even if we are not persecuting or physically targeting Christians as he was. Still the Bible describes us all as by nature enemies of God. Each person therefore who is genuinely a converted Christian, owes their conversion to the grace of God and specifically to Jesus.

So let’s focus now on **the person he met**. Because while he was on the way to arrest Christians, Jesus Christ arrested him. Let’s look at verses 3-5.

***<sup>3</sup>As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup>"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.***

Obviously some details there are specific to the conversion of Saul. We need to be sensible, as always when studying Acts. Just because it happened this way then to Saul, doesn’t mean it must happen the same way to us and that all Christian conversion must be like this. People talk about seeing the light or having ‘a Damascus Road experience’ – and one result of that is that if I haven’t had a flash of light when I came to Christian faith I feel inadequate.

No. Why do we insist on some details but not all? This story isn’t telling me I will only ever be converted if I travel on the Jerusalem to Damascus road! The point in some ways is that this is abnormal, not normal. Because what is reported here is one of the crucial events in the history of the church.

The bright light was vital for Paul. He had thought that Jesus had died under God’s curse. Now it was clear that Jesus was glorified.

Paul saw him visibly too. Because he was going to be an apostle. A qualification for that was that you had to be a first hand eyewitness of the Risen Jesus. You and I are not in that category.

So we must not look for an exact correspondence between the detail of what happened to Paul and what happens to us. Nevertheless there are 2 things here in common with all Christian conversions.

First, **A personal encounter with Jesus**. Verse 4 reads: *'Saul, Saul, said Jesus, Why do you persecute me?'* He was addressed personally by name in a face to face encounter. Up to that point, of course, he knew plenty about him; in all probability, here for the first time, he met him and began a relationship with him.

Second, **A personal surrender to Jesus**. Look at verse 5 and the question Saul asked: *Who are you, Lord?*

Everything about the glory of the moment made it clear. This was the same Lord that Moses had met at the burning bush and the same Lord that Isaiah had seen in the temple. But now that Lord had an unexpected name – in verse 5, Saul gets his answer: *'I am Jesus'*. This was unthinkable: that the Jesus who had died, Paul now had to acknowledge as Lord.

It meant unconditional surrender to him: look how it is described in verses 6-9:

*<sup>6</sup>"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."<sup>7</sup>The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.<sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.<sup>9</sup>For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

A proud man has been humbled. It was all to do with the person he had met – Jesus of Nazareth had transformed him. And those two elements – a personal encounter with Jesus and a personal surrender to Jesus are what it means to be a Christian.

No one is a Christian simply because their family or friends are Christians. Jesus calls us each by name – only I can respond for myself. Equally, it's not a matter of coming to a Christian fellowship either: I can do that for years, even decades. I must come personally to him and surrender to him as Lord.

3 applications as we conclude...

One is the title of our sermon this morning: **if him, anyone...**

I suppose I mean by that that we cannot rule anyone out as beyond the reach of God. If you think of the person you know who is the toughest nut to crack in their opposition to Christ? Well – if God can convert Saul, he can surely convert them.

But there is more than that here too: **if him, everyone...** Saul was converted with a definite purpose in the mind of God, which we will hear more about in coming weeks. This conversion was important, because Paul would become the Apostle to the Gentiles.

So from this point onwards, Christianity becomes not just a small sect of Judaism, but in principle a world faith – for everyone. If him, therefore, anyone, anywhere is important for God. How seriously God takes the reaching of the world for Christ. I wonder if we are the same: if him, anyone.

Then thirdly, as I conclude: if him, me! Is there someone here saying to themselves: 'I can never be accepted by God'?

Well with the conversion of Saul, God is saying to you today: no matter how unworthy you are. Nobody is beyond his reach. Our communion now says the same thing to us all. If him, me! Thank God for it!

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)