

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Conversion of St. Paul

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the forty-fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“... For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord; and there is none else. I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth: I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain: I the Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right.

“Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations: they have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save. Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them take counsel together: who hath declared this from ancient time? who hath told it from that time? have not I the Lord? and there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength: even to him shall men come; and all that are incensed against him shall be ashamed. In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.³

“It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me. And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”⁴

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

One commentary says about the forty-fifth Chapter of Isaiah: “[Verses] 1-8 put the Lord’s control of [the Persian Emperor] Cyrus in the setting of His [that is, the Lord’s] total sovereignty ..., His world-wide self-revelation ..., and

³ II Corinthians 12:1-9 (KJV).

⁴ Isaiah 45:22 (KJV).

⁵ *Derek Kidner, Isaiah*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED 3rd ed. 614 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

⁶ Isaiah 45:22 (KJV).

⁷ *E.g.*, Acts 10:1--11:1-18.

⁸ Isaiah 45:22 (KJV).

⁹ Isaiah 45:23b (KJV).

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His will to vindicate the right...”⁵ In this view, therefore, God moved Cyrus to permit the Jews to return to Palestine from their captivity in Mesopotamia as the beginning of a process that God intends both to demonstrate His divine control of human affairs and to reveal Himself to the world.

Thus the latter part of Chapter 45 of Isaiah continues on from that foundation of the Lord’s sovereignty and His self-revelation. From Verse 18 through the end of the Chapter, the part that forms our First Lesson today, Isaiah asserts that while God’s ways may at times appear inscrutable to mankind, they work to an overall design and in that design God reveals Himself to us.

The proper end of this process of self-revelation is that all the world shall acknowledge God to be the Lord: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”⁶

Theme and Development:

In this present age, that began with Our Lord’s Ascension and that will continue until He comes again in glory to judge the world, His Church is His chosen means of bringing salvation to all peoples of the world. Further, there can be no doubt that God’s principal agent setting the Church on that path was the Jewish Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, whom, after his conversion to Christianity, we recognize as Saint Paul.

Had the original – and Jewish – Christians remained simply a small Jewish sect in Jerusalem, God’s purpose would not have been accomplished. Certainly St. Peter played an important rôle in overcoming the social and religious prejudices of those Jewish Christians so as to convince them God wished them to accept non-Jews into the new Faith.⁷

No one, however, not even St. Peter, was as instrumental in actually bringing the Church to the non-Jewish “nations” as was St. Paul. Thus his conversion from the Pharisaical faction of Judaism to Christianity was vital to the spread of the Church into a world-wide religion, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

We remember especially two contributions Paul made to this process. First, just by themselves, his physical exertions to evangelize the Mediterranean basin would have made him worthy of remembrance. Thanks to him, and to the companions he led and inspired, such as Saints Luke and Barnabas, his missionary journeys left Asia Minor – today’s Turkey – planted with a seedbed of churches, traces of which persist even today after more than six centuries of Muslim persecution. Even more visibly, he left Greece such a firmly Christian country that it remains to this day the real mother country of world-wide Orthodox Christianity despite the centuries of Muslim occupation and oppression that Greece, too, suffered.

Nor was this an easy task. Apart from the sheer distances and difficulties of travel in that day and age, Paul labored under political, religious, and medical obstacles that would have daunted a lesser man. Only on rare occasions did he let his guard down enough to show something of the exhaustion and worry produced by this constant effort; we have a hint of one of these times in today’s Second Lesson.

These evangelistic efforts, undertaken against such great odds and at such personal cost, would by themselves be more than enough reason for us to celebrate God’s providence in converting St. Paul. Yet his contributions did not stop there. His reflective mind, trained in the rabbinical schools and as he applied it to the practical problems of his infant church congregations, produced the beginnings of Christian theology, especially of a theology that could explain and commend the Faith to the non-Jewish world.

And his pen, inspired as we believe it to have been by the Holy Spirit, preserved those reflections and observations in such pithy, pregnant form that Paul himself stands as the author of more books of the New Testament than does anyone else.

Thus Paul stands not only as the premier evangelist of the early Church but also as its outstanding thinker and writer. For these triple gifts, any one of which would have made the crowning achievement of the life of a lesser man, we give thanks today.

Conclusion:

Of course, it can mean nothing to St. Paul himself that today we remember and celebrate his life and work. He has enjoyed the vision of God for nearly two thousand years now. These observances, however, are important for us because they remind us of the work that was done at the birth of the Church and so to inspire us to continue that work in our own time.

The Church’s task, and therefore our own personal tasks, will not be complete until “all people who on earth do dwell” have heeded the Lord’s commands, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else...”⁸ and “[U]nto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”⁹

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928).

² Isaiah 45:18-end (KJV).