

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL (JANUARY 25)**

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Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the forty-fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“... For thus saith [SETH] 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.⁴

“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.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Ordinarily when I preach, I select a text from one of the Propers for the day and develop it. This morning I am not going to do that. Rather, I am going to deal with the conversion of St. Paul as it is told in various passages scattered throughout the book of Acts and the letters of the Apostle himself. I will do a little more speculating than I usually do, and I will conclude with what I believe God is calling us to do today.

The conversion of St. Paul was marked by a change in his name. Names are important in the Bible. A person's name is his identity. It is indicative of his character or his destiny. A change in someone's name indicates a change in that person's character

and destiny. It also indicates a change in the authority to whom that person submits, because names are always conferred by the head of the group to which that person belongs.

St. Paul was given the name “Saul” by his parents when he was circumcised. He was raised as a Pharisee. He became known as “Paul” after he met the living Christ and came under His leadership. As a Jew living in a Gentile city, Saul was used to being part of a minority. He was used to being different. Even among his own people he set apart. The very word “Pharisee” means someone who is set apart. So the idea of swimming against the tide rather than simply drifting with it was part of Saul’s life experience from the beginning, and it served him well after his conversion.

The probability is that Saul went to Jerusalem to study the law under the leading rabbis of his day. Even then, I suspect that he may have had some reservation about the legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament that he was being taught. I suspect that because of the ferocity with which he persecuted the disciples of Jesus, “Breathing out threats and slaughter” against them. Dissent is not a threat to those who are confident in their own beliefs. Those who are insecure in their beliefs try to silence their opposition in order to avoid hearing their own doubts articulated and having them bubble up and disturb their complacency.

But Saul began to entertain the idea that he might be wrong when he witnessed the martyrdom of St. Stephen. On that occasion he saw a man willing die for beliefs that were different from his own, a man who took such comfort in those beliefs that he was able to pray for those who were stoning him to death. That testimony made a great impression on Saul as he stood by holding the coats of the stone throwers and urging them on.

The possibility of being wrong was frightening to Saul, and he tried not to think about it, but he soon learned that being wrong is not necessarily fatal. He was riding to Damascus in order to bring to trial some disciples of Jesus who had fled there to escape persecution by the Jewish authorities. On the way he had a dra-

matic experience. He was knocked off his high horse, literally and figuratively, and was blinded by a brilliant light. He heard a voice addressing him in Hebrew: “Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

The voice was that of the risen Christ – the same Christ Who says in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.” This is the same Christ who says “In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me.” Christ identifies Himself with those who are persecuted by the same religious establishment that condemned Him to death. So here He says to the man who is pursuing His loyal followers, “Why are you persecuting ME?”

Confronted by the Glory of the risen Christ, Saul is reduced to blind helplessness by it. Still lying on the ground, he asks two questions. The first is reminiscent of Moses’ question at the burning bush: “Who are you, Lord?” And just as God identified Himself to Moses as the One who suffered with His people held in bondage by the Egyptians, so Jesus identified Himself to Saul as the One who suffers with His people under persecution by the Jews.

Those nagging doubts that have bothered Saul’s conscience for so long can finally no longer be suppressed. “It is hard for you to kick against the goads,” says the voice. Finally Saul succumbs and asks his second question: “What do you want me to do?”

Having set out for Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, Saul leaves the city with a new name, a new master, and a new authority and commission. Under the authority of the chief priests, Saul was arrogant and vindictive. Under the authority of Christ, Paul was humble and compassionate, willing to do what he had seen St. Stephen do and to suffer martyrdom if necessary for the truth of the Gospel.

That kind of authority is real authority. It is not simply the exercise of power. But it does have power. It has the power not

only to change people’s behavior but to change their hearts. Paul the Apostle was able to change many more hearts by the exercise of spiritual power than Saul the Pharisee could ever change by the exercise of worldly power.

You and I are living in a time that calls for the exercise of Apostolic authority. If we are speak with that kind of authority, we must, like Saul, humble ourselves before Him who speaks from the throne of His cross. Like Paul the Apostle, we must discard the protection of self-righteousness and be willing to listen to those who do not agree with us and debate with them. We must also be willing to die for what we believe is true and right and, – this is very important – like Jesus and St. Stephen and St. Paul, we must pray for those who oppose us and oppress us. When we do that, we can change people’s hearts just as they did.

Finally, if we learn one lesson from the conversion of St. Paul let it be this: The God we serve is able to bring good out of evil and use the power of Satan against him. The God we serve is able to transform an enemy into a friend. His power and grace turned Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Apostle. We can safely put our trust in that same grace and power today.

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St. Alban’s Anglican Catholic Church
Richmond, Virginia

January 25, 2009

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² *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 45:18-end (KJV).

⁴ II Corinthians 12:1-9 (KJV).