

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	25 January 2026
Service:	Eucharist, The Conversion of Paul
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

Today's festival raises two questions: what was the conversion of St Paul and what relevance might it have for us today as followers of Christ?

Throughout the Church's history, Paul's conversion has been explained in a fairly simple way. Saul was a Jew, a strict Pharisee. As we have just heard, on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, he had a vision of light and accepted Jesus as Saviour. It has usually been understood that as a result he left one religion for another. Having been a Jew, Paul became a Christian. Ever since then, the expression a 'Damascus Road experience' signifies a sudden and dramatic change in one's life. It is a nice, neat narrative, but as with most realities, the truth was not so simple.

Paul did not simply leave one religion – Judaism – for another religion – Christianity, the way you or nowadays might become a Muslim or a Buddhist. At that point Christianity was still a movement within the Jewish religion. Paul never stopped being a Jew. Rather, he became a Jew who believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the Lord's anointed one. Paul saw that through the coming of Jesus, salvation is offered not just to one people but to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. However, Paul insisted that God had not rejected his chosen people, even if they did not acknowledge Christ as that wider offer to everyone else.

Paul's favourite word was always 'grace.' He saw that in no way had we merited God's call any more than the Jewish people had merited theirs. It is all God's freely bestowed gift so that no one, Jew or Gentile, may boast in the presence of God. That message of grace is what Paul called 'the Gospel,' the Good News.'

There could be no better news than the revelation that one is loved eternally by God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that through faith and baptism one's sins are forgiven.

Far from imagining that God had rejected his people, Paul agonised over the fact that most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. But he did not draw the false conclusion that unfortunately too many Christians have, that God had broken his covenant with his people and rejected them, thereby making the Jewish religion null and void.

Of course, an irrevocable break did occur between Jews and Christians, but it took a couple of centuries before that became final, with such disastrous consequences for the people who had given us Paul and Jesus himself. We can thank God that in our era, after the horrors suffered by the Jews in the twentieth century, most churches at least now acknowledge that God did not reject his first-called people and establish that such an idea has no basis in Paul's teaching.

What then do we celebrate today? It is Paul's conversion to Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, whom he recognised as the eternal Son of God and Saviour of the world. We celebrate God's unbreakable love for all humanity, including the people he first chose to be his own. Even as we proclaim that Jesus is for everyone, let us rejoice in the Jewish roots of Paul and of our Christian faith and reflect on Christ's words in John; 'Salvation comes from the Jews.'

Which brings me to the second question this festival raises. What is the relevance of Paul's conversion to us today? I must admit that much as I venerate Paul as the Apostle of the Gentiles, I do sometimes struggle with him. I think I am probably not the only Christian who can say that! I struggle with his apparently absolute certainties, his definitive declarations, and the fact that some Christians almost seem to reference him more than Jesus - something he would never have accepted himself. Paul definitely knew who the Saviour was and it was not himself!

I struggle especially with the dramatic nature of his conversion. I have never had any kind of dramatic experience like that myself and I suspect that quite a few of you in church today have probably not had one either. Of course, there are other famous dramatic conversions in Christian history and many Christians nowadays who testify that they have had one. There may well be people here today who have had an experience at least equivalent to Paul's. If so, well and good because that was how God chose to reveal his grace to you. But for many

of us, he hasn't done it that way that way. For many – maybe for most – it has been a much more extended process.

Many of us were baptised as infants – a practice to which the Church of England, like Martin Luther, has always been firmly committed - and brought up in a Christian context. For many of us there has never been a life without reference to the Christian community, nor have we ever had such a blinding encounter with Christ. As a priest talking to those who come as adults to a more active faith, it is my experience that conversion is usually a developing process rather than a moment of utterly convincing insight – not normally a dramatic 'Damascus Road experience' such as Paul had.

I therefore don't think there has to be such an experience in every conversion to Christ. When we look at the calling of the other apostles recorded in the New Testament we see a variety of different calls, many of which were ongoing conversions, a slow process of change that took time and demonstrated God's patience.

St Peter, the other great apostle, whom the Church has always celebrated with Paul, can be a good example. Peter was called in different ways and at various times throughout his life: initially, at the Sea of Galilee, again, after he misunderstood Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, at the washing of his feet at the Last Supper when, trying to be more humble than Jesus, he was exhorted to follow Christ's way and not his own, most movingly again in Galilee after the resurrection although he had denied his Lord, and even later after Pentecost when he was trying to impose the Jewish Law on Gentile believers and God asked him to widen his understanding of what it would mean to be a Christian.

Peter with his many false starts, changes of mind, and shilly-shallying, is a good reminder that in many cases conversions are not dramatic experiences but a slow process of God whittling away at our egocentric inability to see what he really wants and getting us to change. And in addition to Peter, the New Testament also introduces us to John, the disciple whom we are told Jesus loved most. There is no evidence in his case of any Damascus Road type of experience. It may be perhaps that Paul needed a dramatic conversion experience because otherwise even God could not have broken through his self-certainty.

When it comes to conversion therefore, I think that there are a variety of possible models, and they do not all have to copy Paul! For some it might indeed take the form of a blinding light. But for many - perhaps for most - it will be gentler and more progressive, more like a series of hints and guesses, or

hints followed by guesses, as a modern poet put it. In today's festival, as we celebrate and give thanks for the dramatic conversion of this great apostle and saint - certainly one of the greatest of saints - let us celebrate also these two truths:

Conversion is essentially our turning to Jesus as the manifestation on earth of God's grace and love for all, Jew and Gentile alike. On the Damascus Road, Christ made Paul see that he had loved him and given himself for him. With Paul, let us recognise that for ourselves – and with Paul, follow Jesus.

But the way in which Paul's conversion occurred should not be imposed simplistically on everyone. If I have not had such an experience, I should not conclude that I am therefore an imperfect follower of Jesus or must be lacking something in my faith. Remember the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament. He did not hear God in earthquake, fire, or storm, but in a still small voice. Among the wonderful ways in which God calls, it is not the case that one size fits all.

What matters is that one's conversion - however it began, whether with a blinding light, a gentle whisper, or just a nudge from God - must become an ongoing process, a lifetime's turning to Christ, a reaching out in faith to the one who has reached down to us in love.