

Coming about

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" ... "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Acts 9:4-5

In religious art, Saint Paul is traditionally identified as a figure holding a double-edged sword, not because he was a warrior, but because he wrote that the Word of God is like a double-edged sword that reaches to our innermost being. Originally named Saul, Paul was from the city of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, located in what is now modern Turkey. Ancient Tarsus was a center of commerce known for its sophistication and its enjoyment of cultural advantages of learning, theatre, art, music and athletics. Contemporary accounts describe Paul as short of stature, bow-legged, with eyebrows that met over a hooked nose. He was a proud to be a Roman citizen, steeped in Greek culture, and a member of the Jewish faith, educated as a doctor of the law as well as a Pharisees, the strict guardians of the law.

At time of his conversion, Saul had been searching out and arresting Christians. He took it upon himself to persecute them with a vengeance because he believed that Christians were a threat to the established tradition and order. His hatred for the new movement led him to seek out and annihilate as many Christians as he could. We first encounter Saul in the scriptures when he is present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Saul's efforts to stamp out Christianity come to an abrupt end on the road to Damascus in Syria. He is literally stopped in his tracks by a blinding light. He is confronted by the risen Christ to stop persecuting him. It must have been quite a sight to see this proud man blinded and led stumbling and helplessly along the road into the city of Damascus. He remained blind for several days to give him time to contemplate what has happened. A disciple named Ananias baptizes him and restores his sight as a beginning of his complete reversal in his life. From that time on, this one time persecutor of Christians becomes a full time soldier for Christ.

As with the most of his life, his conversion is dramatic. In choosing this highly motivated spiritual warrior, God knew that extraordinary means would have to be used to get his attention. God always knows better than we do who is right person for the right task at the right time. After his conversion, nothing would ever again be the same. From that point on, he is a changed man in attitude, outlook and purpose. He takes the name of Paul, referring to his short stature, ironic for this towering soldier for Christ.

A conversion as dramatic as Paul's is not a mere shift in direction, but a complete turnabout. The Greek term for that is *metanoia*, a complete turning around in the opposite direction. His conversion takes the wind out of his sails and in nautical terms, he comes about, leaving him momentarily dead in the water until the Holy Spirit inspires him to take a new tack. God saw in Paul the necessary greatness for being the foremost missionary for Christ. He is an example of how it is often easier to convert an atheist than an agnostic. You know what you are dealing with in someone totally opposed to you than one who is neutral, uncommitted and abstains from having an opinion.

Paul is a feisty character with a powerful and dynamic personality who loves a confrontation in which he can argue his case. In his epistles, Paul can be intimidating and aggravating in one instance and endearing in another. In reading his letters, we find in some

cases run-on sentences that leave us wondering what he is trying to say while in other instances his writing is of the highest form of theology that lifts us up out of the everyday to the heart of God. The enigmatic character of Saint Paul is crucial to the growth of the early Christian church.

Paul's letters to the new churches were never actually written in his own hand. Because he suffered from a mysterious eye ailment he required the services of a scribe, one of whom was Luke who served as Paul's personal physician. Luke accompanied him on his missionary journeys and recorded their experiences in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Later, some of Paul's students acted as his clerks in writing his epistles or letters to the new congregations. One can picture this great figure, striding back and forth, dictating his thoughts as his mind raced along with ideas and concepts that even the best note taker would have difficulty recording. Having made numerous missionary journeys in establishing new churches around the Mediterranean, Paul wrote back letters of encouragement and, when necessary, to admonish them when disputes arose or they showed lack of discipline. During those times, the early church was under great persecution and Paul encouraged them to stay close and hold to the faith that they had received.

Because he was willing to give up his life for the sake of the gospel, Paul eventually died in a Roman prison. In his letter to the Romans, we read his highly developed theology of salvation by faith alone. He encourages those living under adversity and assures them that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses beautifully the selfless nature of Christian love.

One of the most important things Paul had to learn was humility. It didn't come easily for a man of his stature and ego. It must have been difficult for him to admit that he had been headed in the wrong direction, but he had the grace and humility to admit it and turn in the opposite direction.

It takes courage to admit our mistakes and acknowledge where we have been wrong. It takes equally strong courage to renounce what we've always assumed to be right and be willing to learn new attitudes. Where he once took great pride in his religious ancestral heritage and practices, Paul came to realize that it is not our spiritual ancestry, but what we do with who we are now. The Christian church has made great strides in human history by those willing to make a complete changeover in their lives to follow the risen Christ.

In the appearance of the resurrected Christ to Peter and the fisherman, we are reminded that Christ is present with us at all times and places, most familiarly in breaking bread and sharing a meal together. To the disciples, the risen Christ is not a mere wish-fulfilling illusion, but a living person, walking and talking and eating with them. It is by the guidance of the Holy Spirit that people with real human frailties such as Paul become leaders of the church. It is fascinating to read of the squabbles between Peter and Paul as these two giants of the Christian faith worked out their differences over what each felt God wanted for the newly forming church.

Conversion happens in many ways. It happens when we are headed in the wrong direction. It happens when we feel like giving up. It happens when we are feeling very sure of ourselves. What is important is that the door of our soul is always open and ready to welcome the challenge of the Holy Spirit at work in us.