

*Paul's Call*

A few years ago I was asked to teach a course on the theology of St. Paul at the synod's Lay School of Theology and I agreed to do that. Shortly after I agreed to teach that course, I realized that perhaps I needed to do some serious research on Paul to be prepared for that assignment. I had never taught an in-depth course on Pauline Theology like that before. It's true that the best way to learn something for yourself may be to teach it to others. What I learned in studying St. Paul in preparation for that course was fascinating and inspirational for me, and I would like to share some of what I learned with you this morning.

Our First Lesson today was the famous story of St. Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus. Many of us were taught, as I was, that Paul was originally named Saul and that Saul changed his name to Paul after his conversion. Actually, that is not what happened. *Saul* is a Hebrew name and *Paul* is that same name, *Saul*, in Greek, much like *Pablo* is the name *Paul* in Spanish. The Apostle Paul wrote in Greek to people who spoke Greek, so he used the Greek name *Paul* in his letters rather than his Hebrew name *Saul*. However, there are some things about Saul's, or Paul's, conversion, other than his name, that are even more interesting and important for us to know. That story of Paul's conversion and what it means may help better inform and deepen our Christian faith.

The same person who wrote the gospel of St. Luke also wrote the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, commonly called Acts, which is where we find the story of Paul's conversion. Luke tells the story of Paul's conversion in a very dramatic way. Paul was a devout Jew and very zealous for his faith. In Acts we read that Paul had actually been present at the stoning of St. Stephen, the very first martyr for the Christian faith. Today we hear that Paul was going to Damascus to find and arrest more Christians, and bring them back to Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, in chains for trial as heretics. Paul believed he was doing

God a great service by trying to destroy the fledgling Christian church and by stopping their insidious message that Jesus had been raised from the dead making him Lord of all.

As we heard, while Paul was on the road, a bright light suddenly flashed around him. Paul fell to the ground. Paul and his companions heard a voice, saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul asked whom it was speaking to him, and the speaker identified himself as Jesus, and told him to go to the city where he would be instructed what to do. The way Luke tells the story, there is some uncertainty as to whether or not Paul actually saw Jesus at this time. In his writings Paul would assert that he himself had absolutely seen Jesus – in fact, he counts himself as the last person to have seen the risen Christ. Furthermore, Ananias, who Jesus sent to heal Paul, said that Jesus told him that he had appeared to Paul. So, I think we can safely assume that Paul did see the resurrected Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Actually, his experience of the risen Christ would be the determining factor in everything Paul said and did thereafter.

But even as dramatic as Paul’s conversion was, if we look at his life history, we can how the Holy Spirit saw to it that most everything that happened to him before his conversion prepared Paul for that moment. For instance, as a pious Jew, and especially as a member of the Pharisees, who were so strident in their faith, Paul was already hopefully waiting for, even actively looking for, the Messiah. Also, as a Pharisee, Paul would have already believed in life after death, as opposed to some of the Jewish factions, such as the Sadducees, who did not. Moreover, as a persecutor of the church, Paul would have heard the testimonies of Christian believers. He would have seen first-hand how these Christians saints held on to their faith even under oppression. How could Paul not have been impressed by those who laid down their lives rather than deny their Savior!

Do our lives in any way reflect St. Paul’s life? Is the Spirit moving in our lives in a similar way? Paul was a sinner. He would call himself the chief of sinners. Although we don’t

like to admit it, we are sinners too. We are just as guilty of persecuting Christ and his people in our ways as Paul was in his. Yet, just like Paul, God loves us and has a plan for us. All that has happened in our lives, even whatever is happening now, has been drawing us to Christ as Paul was drawn to Christ. God is constantly teaching us, influencing us, preparing us to do his will. Maybe we don't see, maybe we resist the pull of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but it is most definitely there. Not all of us have dramatic conversions like St Paul; for some of us the life of faith is a relatively quiet life. That's all right. We might have a role like Ananias' role, helping others find their faith in Christ. Or God might have something else in mind for us altogether.

Certainly not all of us are going to be famous the way Paul was for his witnessing and evangelizing. But each of us does have the opportunity to witness and testify for Christ in our homes, and among our friends and co-workers. And even as Paul was called to suffer for Christ, so are we. If you find the Christian life comfortable and easy, you're probably not doing it right. Paul would be imprisoned, and shipwrecked, and attempts were made on his life all because he preached the gospel. Eventually he would be beheaded. Paul is one of the great examples of grace under pressure and faith under fire. Would that we all could be more like him.

Paul wrote and spoke a lot, but his message was actually pretty simple: He told us that Jesus is alive and that we have life in his name. He said that our salvation is not based on anything we do, rather, it is all based on Christ and his love for us. That, he said, frees us then to love and serve God and one another. We will one great day be before the throne of God singing our praises to him eternally because of what Christ has done for us. That was John's vision, that is the end result of the gospel Paul preached, and will be our song too. We will all sing *Alabare a mi Senor* which means "I will praise my Lord." Amen.