

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

The Conversion of St Paul 2025

When we look out across the world today we can see all too many people consumed with violent, fanatical and angry intent who express themselves in the language of a religion. Every religion has such people, every religion. Some are just using that language as a vehicle for their violence – cynically, manipulatively. Others are genuine believers, but they have somehow ended up massively warped out of true.

Paul (or Saul, his names would have been interchangeable according to context), belonged to that second category. He was, to quote his own words, a ‘pharisee, born of pharisees’; but he had become an obsessive, zealous persecutor of what was originally known as the Way – a persecutor of those following the way of Jesus of Nazareth. Before we see him on his fateful journey to Damascus, he’s present and approving at the lynching of St Stephen.

Paul had never encountered Jesus in his earthly ministry. So when he finally does, on his way to Damascus, it was a miraculous encounter. And it didn’t turn him into someone else: it turned him into himself, into his real self. He had become so distorted with misunderstanding and unholy anger and dark rage, that only a cataclysmic burst of heavenly light could break through all that.

That light revealed Jesus to Paul, and revealed Paul to the world: the Paul that Jesus knew was possible. And not just possible, but necessary to the building of the Church. *Last of all – Paul writes to the church in Corinth – as to someone untimely born, he appeared to me.*

Paul’s resistance to the gospel, to the good news, was so deep-seated that he needed an encounter with Jesus himself to break it down.

That conversion, that road to Damascus experience, is so dramatic that it has coloured our ideas about conversion ever since. We can find ourselves thinking that conversion has to be – to some degree – radical, astonishing, once and for all.

Sometimes it is, of course. Throughout the ages people have experienced a breaking-in of the light in a way that has seemed definitive, after which life has been fundamentally different.

The pop-star-turned-priest, Richard Coles, well-known to some of you here from his time spent in Wymondham, tells of a startling conversion experience in the first part of his autobiography.

His rickety life as a pop star makes the conversion story the more powerful and thrilling. His band, the Communards, has broken up, and he finds himself drawn to drift into the church of St Albans the Martyr, Holborn, in London. It’s a Sunday morning, full solemn Mass: incense, vestments, processions, music. He’s sitting at the back, holding back. But then he experiences an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. It really is as though the chains fall off; and he is reduced to floods of tears.

He is wry as well as genuine in telling the story. How extraordinary, to experience a classic Protestant-style conversion in such an Anglo-Catholic atmosphere.

Experience it he did, though, and as for Paul so for him – his outer shell of resistance and unknowing is cracked apart to get at the real him within.

That's not the end of the story. It wasn't for Paul. It wasn't for Richard Coles, who goes on to write of his life thereafter which is not suddenly righteous and sober. And it isn't the end of the story for anyone, because we are fallible, failure-prone, stumbling human beings.

Whether we've had a definite conversion experience or not (and I'd guess many of us haven't), it is vital to our understanding of our journey of faith, our pilgrim way, that we humbly accept that we are indeed on a *journey*. Conversion – whether it's dramatic and sudden, or something much gentler and maybe only recognised in retrospect – conversion as a specific experience or moment is just a first turn. Except for the rarest of saintly folk, our pilgrim way is going to be punctuated by many such turns.

I'm talking about 'turns' because conversion literally means 'turning'. We turn to face the light. And, being human, we keep turning away out of the light and need to turn back to it – again and again. This is why the constant mercy of God, demonstrated by Jesus on the cross, is what makes our pilgrim journey possible. We fall down, he picks us up. We come back, and he runs towards us. These are converting moments, converting experiences.

I want to finish with two challenges.

The first is: be open to conversion. That's being ready to receive grace, the grace of probably-daily conversion. I use the word 'grace' because God will be in these converting experiences. They happen to us, but we have to be open to them; and alert to recognising them. They can come in times of private prayer or in worship; they can come to us in what we see on the news, or in something we read, or as we listen to music, or as we contemplate nature, or in our encounters with another person.

The priest/poet John Donne knew how this worked and knew our need for it. This is from one of his Holy Sonnets:

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

It's not just about hoping for warm, fuzzy feelings and helpful inspiration. God in his Spirit may need to do a bit of breaking, blowing and burning. It's because he's seeking to mend us.

The second challenge is: dare to be the agent of conversion. As well as all the ways in which we can be on the receiving end of God's action, and open to that, so we need to be on the alert to being the agent of such converting moments for others. We need to seize those opportunities when they arise – in what we say, and how we say it; in what we do, and how we do it.