

Thrown From My High Horse

The Conversion of Paul

Mark 16:15-18

Today we celebrate the robust, yet touching person of Paul,
Paul, who, fortunately for us, wears both his greatness *and his weakness* on his sleeve.
In particular, we celebrate the *conversion* of Paul.
It was so momentous that the Church invites *everyone* to gather in awe...

Paul was born in Tarsus, raised in a strong Jewish family, educated in Jerusalem,
and learned from his father the art of tent-making.
And, as we know, he became unbelievably passionate about his Jewish faith.
In fact, he somehow became a fire-breathing dragon regarding his faith.

We celebrate how amazingly God worked in Paul, and works in us.
The term “conversion” suggests a *turnaround*, a *change in direction*,
more specifically a *turning to God*.
Spiritual conversion is with respect to both mind and heart,
which together form the seat of our person, humanly speaking.
Spiritual conversion entails both mind and heart touching God, and results in

- a deeper perspective (in faith)
- an increase in love, and thus a melting of anything hard in the heart

It is *God* who brings about conversion. It is not the result of a moral self-cleaning.

The Acts of the Apostles tell us that Paul was “breathing murderous threats”.
Just before the incident of his conversion,
we read that he consented to the execution of Stephen,
and, during Stephen’s burial (how rude!), “was trying to destroy the church,
entering house after house,
and dragging out men and women (sounds like Jason in “Friday the 13th”).
For Paul to be converted, it “took” God manifesting his might.
Whispering into the depths of the heart, which God so enjoys, would not have worked.
God needed to “strong-arm” Saul.
Paul needed to be thrown from his high horse!

Now, I often hear,
“I wish God would blast me. I am far too self-absorbed otherwise to get it.”
God normally does not “blast” us.
Why? Because He does not want us, in even the slightest way, to feel forced
to acknowledge and love Him.
Love cannot be forced...

Now oddly, the Church gives, to celebrate Saint Paul, a gospel
that does not explicitly include him.

“Jesus appeared to the Eleven”, among whom Paul was *not*.

Why this gospel?

In the Scriptures, we consider first and foremost the wonder of God and wonders by God.

A passage that does not explicitly mention Paul can serve our discovery
of what God has done in Paul nonetheless,

just as it serves our discovery of what God wishes to do in us.

Paul exemplifies “Apostle” unbelievably.

(Paul, by the way, was nonetheless ranked an Apostle.)

According to Mark, this is the last appearance of Jesus after his resurrection.

As we read, He “rebukes the Eleven for their unbelief and hardness of heart”.

But He commissions them nonetheless.

Apostle” means “one commissioned”, “one sent forth”.

Jesus sends forth the Eleven. Jesus sends forth Paul.

Jesus sends forth each one of us

—with all of our baggage, with our unbelief and hardness of heart.

Jesus sends forth, implying origin of movement in Him.

Origin of movement in Him implies instrumentality.

An Apostle is an instrument of God.

The Eleven, Paul, *we*, are to proclaim the “Gospel”, the “good news”,
that is, the reality of God become human, and thus

- God come close
- God embracing every fiber of who we are

In that, we seek to be *instruments* of the One who alone really awakens the human spirit.

Jesus then articulates signs that will accompany

those who believe, that is, those who lovingly acquiesce:

- expulsion of demons
- speaking of new languages
- handling of serpents
- drinking of deadly things with no harm
- laying of hands on the sick, who will recover

And so, disciples of Christ will be endowed with everything they need
to make a mint as the feature act at the circus side show.

Seriously!

I was going to say that the only thing Jesus left out was breathing fire,
but Paul has that one covered.

What is this all about?!?!?

How literally are we to take this?

It is important to highlight what precedes this list: “*in my name*”.

A believer, one who is joined to Christ, the God-man,
acts in his name, that is, in his person.

In other words, Christ, God, wishes to act in and through us.

If so, we “reign” over the universe.

Now when I say “reign over the universe”, I do not mean that we become Spider Man.

We participate in God’s power, but God’s power is at the service of His love.

We reign in love.

In the end, Jesus predicts that His love and light will be victorious in his friends, overcoming all that can normally stop love and light:

- evil
- foreign tongues
- serpents
- poison
- illness

and what these represent.

Paul did not go on to become humanly perfect.

Paul went on to become a great lover of Christ,

and, in that, an instrument of things divine.

He split with Barnabus, his original ministry pal, because they could not see eye-to-eye.

He struggled to the end, declaring poignantly (Romans 7),

“I do not do the good I want to do.”

But his thinking was transfigured.

Instead of despairing as we do when we struggle, he was filled with hope.

He says (II Corinthians 2),

“A thorn in the flesh was given to me.

Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me,

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you,

for power is made perfect in weakness.”

I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses,

in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.

Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions,

and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Long live the day we come to this realization.

We ought to be filled with hope that baffles us.

So often we think it impossible really to love, and we shy away.

Au contraire, we should act boldly—of course, aware of our weaknesses,

but boasting that Christ indwells them and is not going anywhere.

“Yes we can”—not because of anyone but God Himself,

who promises to be with us until the end of the age.

As Paul says, “*Nothing* can separate us from the love of God.” (Romans 8:39)