

Conversion of St Paul , 25 January 2026

Acts 9:1–22, Galatians 1:11–24, and Matthew 19:23–30

Call and transformation

Today, we're remembering St Paul: how his life was turned around, and what he did with that new life. But hang on a minute: is "the conversion of St Paul" actually the right name for this festival? We talk about "road-to-Damascus" experiences as the model of "conversion" – something sudden, dramatic, definitive – but it's not like that for everyone, and the New Testament doesn't use "conversion" language here. Maybe "call" is better, like the experiences of prophets being invited by God into a task. Certainly Paul himself, in Galatians, doesn't speak of turning from one religion to another but of being "set apart before I was born and called through God's grace." That suggests continuity rather than abandonment: Paul's interpreting his past differently in light of Christ, but he doesn't reject the God of his ancestors. Paul isn't converting to a different faith; he's being given startling clarity about the God he already serves.

The account of what happened as Saul was approaching Damascus is so important Luke gives it three times in the book of Acts: once here, told by the narrator, and then later on, as Paul tells the story twice more to different groups of people. What's clear is that Saul was a persecutor of the new Christian movement, the followers of The Way. He'd been there at the death of Stephen, the first one to be killed for his faith. He was doing all he could to stamp it out, convinced he was right and defending God with violence. Which, incidentally, is never a good idea. The blinding light interrupts not only his journey but his certainty. Instead of storming into Damascus ready to question people and arrest those he found to be Christians, Saul was led, weak and blinded, into the city, dependent on those around him. One of the things we find in Paul's letters is an awareness that his weakness allowed him to rely on God's strength. That God can use human frailty. That our powerlessness can reveal God's power. That's a hard lesson to have to learn, for Paul and for us.

And Saul, blind and fragile, must wait, pray, and be healed by Ananias, a member of the very community he was persecuting. The Church is central: Paul's new life begins with baptism. Conversion or call aren't things we do to ourselves or on our own: they're received, and they involve the body of Christ. Transformation isn't about self-improvement – it's God's work, and often that comes through other people.

And what of Ananias? Things would've been very different if he hadn't been so tuned in to what God was saying, so obedient and willing to risk everything. He'd heard of this man Saul, was frightened of what he could do to all the Christians in the city – and yet, because he loved and trusted God, he goes to Saul and calls him brother. Could any of us have done that? On a good day, I'd like to think maybe I could – but if I'm really honest I'm not so sure. Ananias shows us what courage, faith, and a spirit of forgiveness – and hope for the future – look like. When we give thanks for Paul's life and ministry, we can also thank God for the ministry of Ananias – because honestly if Ananias hadn't done that I doubt we'd be celebrating anything today.

We get a sense of how Paul interpreted what happened in his letter to the Galatians. He takes no credit for anything – it's God's grace. He stresses his message isn't of human origin; he frames his encounter with Christ as a revelation and a calling, not a rejection of Judaism (even though in Acts it's his Roman name, not his Hebrew one, that becomes dominant). He's commissioned to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles, to bring those who were religious outsiders into a relationship with God. And this took a while: the months and years he spent in Arabia and Syria and Cilicia shows that transformation takes time; it's not only a moment of blinding light.

Paul changed: the persecutor, the zealot, the one who breathed out threats and murder against the Christians, became one of the great leaders in the same movement he'd tried so hard to destroy. But on another level, he didn't change. God took all his education, all his knowledge of Jewish law and tradition, all his energy and his persuasive powers of speech – all these things, all these gifts – and used them. God's call often reinterprets our past rather than erasing it – God put all of the old Saul to work for the gospel.

Something we see with Paul connects with Jesus' words in today's Gospel, that glimpse of the upside down economy of God, the way "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Paul was "first": a respected Pharisee, someone powerful. After that encounter outside Damascus, he becomes one of the "last" – dependent, vulnerable, often persecuted. God overturns our expectations, our hierarchies, our sense of who deserves grace. Paul knew that God's grace isn't "deserved" and it is for everyone. If God could love a former persecutor, if Jesus could die for someone who tried to destroy the church, then God's love and grace are really and truly available to everybody. To absolutely all of us.

Maybe today isn't just about Paul – in fact I suspect the last thing he would've wanted was a day focusing on him. Today is also about us, and our lives. Paul's life was turned around, starting with that day on the road outside Damascus, and it happened because of a personal encounter with the risen Jesus. But different people come to Jesus by different routes: we don't all have one sudden, dramatic moment. Sometimes it's not the Damascus road but the road to Emmaus – a longer journey with many questions and conversations. And it wasn't just about one day in Paul's life: the change in him lasted until his death because of continuing encounters with Jesus.

What about us? How do we encounter Jesus? As well as that moment on the road Paul met Jesus in Ananias, coming to him scared but obedient. And Paul continued to encounter Jesus in Word and Sacrament, heard God speaking to him in Scripture and touched God in the breaking of the bread. We remember what the voice Paul heard outside Damascus said to him: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Paul continued to encounter Jesus in the Church, since Jesus identified himself with the Church. We too meet Jesus in the body of Christ. It's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "Christ existing as the community" – and Bonhoeffer didn't just mean Christ exists in the Church as a whole, as some sort of generalised, ideal society. He meant Christ exists as the actual local church, in real-life congregations like this one of ours here, and like the communities to which Paul wrote all his letters. In real-life congregations, with all their differences of opinions, all their past histories of agreement and disagreement. Christ exists as the community.

So today isn't really about Paul at all – or at least, not only about Paul. It's about us. Like Paul, we encounter the risen Christ not just in one dramatic moment, but again and again: in Word and Sacrament, in Scripture and bread and wine, and in the life of the community Christ calls his body. Christ exists as this community – this real, imperfect, local church – and here Christ continues to meet us, to change us, and to send us. As we come to this table, Christ opens our eyes again, calling us into his work of reconciliation and hope. Calling us to offer our gifts, our energy, and even our past mistakes for the sake of the gospel. And perhaps calling some of us, this week, to be Ananias – to offer healing, courage, and hope to someone we fear, or someone who has hurt us. Go from here knowing that the same grace that transformed Paul is at work among us still – and that we are sent, changed and changing, for the life of the world.

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