



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Conversion of Saint Paul (25th January) 2025

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles contains two accounts of the Conversion of Saint Paul: one told about him and one, which he narrates himself during one of the many speeches he delivered: the two descriptions are substantially the same. Furthermore, Saint Paul refers to the experience in his letters.

For Saint Paul and those who saw in him an authoritative figure in the life of the Church, this was a key moment in the development of Christianity. On it, at least so far as the Pauline strand of emerging Christianity supposed, rested his claim to the status of an Apostle - a assertion not universally recognised at the time - certainly amongst the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Those who had witnessed his persecution of the Church remained suspicious of him - as well they might.

Yet, in subsequent generations, the story of his conversion and his claim to theological and moral authority within the life of the Church became generally accepted, even if the question of whether he was an Apostle in the sense that the Twelve - or thirteen, if you include Judas Iscariot - were Apostles. Today, with our understanding of the role of the Twelve, there are good reasons to qualify his claim, probably acknowledging that he can be counted an Apostle by extension of the concept.

The importance of all this rests on the fact that it was not only Saul/Paul who was changed by the experience of his Conversion. In the course of time, the whole Church would be transformed by his work and teaching; and, in fact, the Jewish circles from which Christianity emerged and in which it was initially incubated would become but a small part of the Christian picture. In the centuries to come it would be Rome and Constantinople rather than Jerusalem, which would be epicentres of ecclesiastical life.

These developments were rooted in the Gentile mission undertaken by Saint Paul: it was a facet of the Church's work adumbrated by the teaching of Christ - itself echoing ancient prophecies - by scarcely realised during His incarnate Life.

However, the spread of Christianity involved much more than simply an increase in its geographical embrace. As we learn from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the Church herself was changed as she filtered out across the Roman Empire and beyond. The Gentile converts - fruits of Saint Paul's work - balked at various Jewish traditions and at what was probably a rather tense debate at the so-called Council of Jerusalem, the requirement of the observances was lifted, which, in due course, would see them fall into widespread desuetude.

Of course, after Saint Paul's time there was much more to come both as Christianity came into contact with other philosophical traditions and, indeed, as her worldly fortunes changed and she moved into her ascendancy.

Whether or not Saint Paul would appreciate all of the developments, which ensued from his work, we cannot say; but it is all rooted in that one event - however it actually transpired - which we commemorate today. Through it, Paul was established with Peter as, in the words of some Liturgical texts, the twin pillars of the Church. Both in their persons and in a representative way, they constitute the Gentile and Jewish threads which fed into the consolidation of ecclesiastical life and theology.

This perspective provides an important insight. The processes begun by Saint Paul continue as the Church engages with an ever-changing world and new people are incorporated into the Christian community. The phenomenon of development is a living and contemporary reality in every age. At the same time, Saint Paul had to refer back to the Church in Jerusalem for the validation of his work; and in all that we contemplate in our own generation, we must be careful not to separate ourselves from the essential inheritance, which makes us the authentic expression of Christ's Gospel.