

New Brighton, Saturday 24th September 2022

St Paul

His life, his missions (part 1)

“For I give you to understand, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For neither did I receive it of man, nor did I learn it; but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion: how that, beyond measure, I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it. And I made progress in the Jews' religion above many of my equals in my own nation, being more abundantly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased him, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles, immediately I condescended not to flesh and blood.”¹

This is how the Apostle expresses himself in his epistle to the Galatians, reminding them about the miracle the Saviour did on Damascus' way, approximately year 35 of our era. Saul, at that time terrible persecutor of the Christians, was on his way to Damascus, when God's providence struck him, and transformed him in the “vessel of election”² we all heard about.

This conversion of St Paul on Damascus' way was not only a conversion with all the different aspects it may imply, but also a revelation by Christ himself. In a way, we could say that it was his Pentecost, meaning his conversion was in the meantime, revelation and apostolic investiture.

Cardinal Journet, Swiss cardinal of the mid-20th century, says about this event “it was a real apparition of Christ, who came with all his glory, before him, to push him throughout the world, until the borders of Europe.”

We will never exaggerates the importance of that event, for St Paul himself, but also for the Church, not only at the beginning, but today and tomorrow. “I am Jesus whom thou persecuted”³. St Paul was on his way to persecute Christians, and Christ Himself appeared in his glory, saying He's persecuted. How is it possible? St Paul immediately understood the deep reasons of such paradox: when someone touches the Holy Church, Jesus Himself is touched, because the Church is Christ in his totality. From Damascus, all the theology of St Paul is completely formed, for the essentials.

To understand better his teaching, we must know about St Paul himself. Who was he? Where does he come from?

1. St Paul before his conversion

St Paul, roman citizen (he was beheaded, and not crucified), was born in Tarsus, Cilicia. Today this is south-central Turkey, by the border with Syria. He received from his father the

¹ Gal, I, 11-17

² Acts, IX, 15.

³ Acts, IX, 5.

roman citizenship, and an excellent religious formation. Apparently, he learnt Greek language in other place than jewish schools.

Tarsus was a very wealthy city, freed of taxes from Rome. Metropolitan city of Cilicia, it was a place of exchange nobody could miss in Asia.

However, this high centre of educated people didn't seem to have a great influence upon this bright mind. We cannot find much evidence of the greek authors of philosophers in St Paul's knowledge. Educated from the age of 6 till 13 in a jewish school, these profane authors were strictly forbidden, and the Bible studied only. St Paul's science is not from the books, but from the Bible, The Book. He only perfectly knows one science, The One Religion.

Aged 13, he went to Jerusalem, around year 18 of our age, where he learnt from Gamaliel, the profession of scribe. This work opened doors to more or less anything, a scribe being a lawyer, a judge, an advisor, a preacher, a rhetorician or a grammarian.

Despite their stupid subtleties and practical difficulties coming from, the pharisees and scribe remained the only people really knowing about and divine law. Jesus Himself, who was their terrible opponent, testifies of their knowledge and science, saying their lessons were to be followed, but not their actions.⁴

Maths, geography, history, philosophy, none of these were important for the Jews, and therefore not taught in their schools. Only morals, religious history of the chosen people, and law: everything from the Bible. Lots of scribes knew it by heart, and many times, we can hear St Paul quoting it from his memory. Even when he doesn't quote it, his language is full of allusion, willingly or not, coming straight to his mind. This is the fruit of a long study, in the little details, of the Sacred Scriptures.

Following the teaching he received, he was a strict observant of the pharisee customs, and therefore, it's not surprising to find him alongside those who murdered St Stephen, holding their coats while they stoned him to death.⁵

Then, horrified with what he heard and saw about this growing sect, he started "entering in from house to house, and dragging away men and women, committed them to prison"⁶.

It's because he was a pious Jew, that he was scared by the Name, the Holy Cross being for him a real scandal, a real thorn in his jewish skin.

If the idea of a new creation was more or less acceptable for him, as he was used to the apocalyptic literature of the Bible, the mystery of the Cross could only be considered as an instrument of shame and curse.

It's quite important to realise how this jewish origin and education is real and took a large place in St Paul's life. He will use this background quite often in his predication across his missions.

Because he grew up in a greek city, he saw a lot from the greek and roman civilisation. No surprise her, the Divine Providence prepared this vessel of election, due to the double influence of the jewish and greek background, to become the Apostle of the Jews, but even more to become the Apostle of the Gentiles.

⁴ Cf, for example, Luke XIII, 6-17.

⁵ Acts, VII, 57-59.

⁶ Acts, VIII, 3.

St Paul was sent to Jerusalem during the hidden life of Jesus. We cannot doubt he left, and probably came back home, before Jesus started his public life. Two reasons for that:

- Such a strong character would have been engaged in the conflict: in favour or against. Most probably against, but Saul would never remain neutral.
- St Paul himself testifies about it: he never met Jesus, and the first time was on Damascus' way.

2. St Paul and the Christians

St Paul never knew Christ face to face. He knew about him firstly through the first Christians, who grew up very quickly. This young community was so big that the Apostles instituted the Diaconate to help them in all charitable works and predications. This is when, for the first time we hear about St Paul in the Acts of the Apostles.

Preaching a crucified Messiah, was due to start a riot from the Pharisees, who were expecting a Messiah, but a glorious one, son of David, pacifier, king of Israel, someone who would restore the antique kingdom of Jerusalem. They were expecting a king strong, glorious and bringing freedom, never a humiliated, lowered or even crucified one.

Preaching about the Cross, despite it was in the continuation and explanation of Psalm 21, or the prophecies of Isaiah, Zachariah or Jeremiah, was scandalous for them. We understand therefore the anger of the pharisees against St Stephen, and why St Paul approved this crime⁷.

But St Stephen prayed for his persecutors. The fruits were not long to come, but went first through the Cross.

Following his martyrdom, a persecution happened against the Christians, who ran away in Syria and Samaria⁸. St Paul was one of the most zealous of them, and received a special mission from the High Priest to go to Damascus⁹. He was probably aged 30-35.

“And as he went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew nigh to Damascus; and suddenly a light from heaven shined round about him. And falling on the ground, he heard a voice saying to him: Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Who said: Who art thou, Lord? And he: I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the goad. And he trembling and astonished, said: Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said to him: Arise, and go into the city, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do. Now the men who went in company with him, stood amazed, hearing indeed a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. But they leading him by the hands, brought him to Damascus.”¹⁰

He was then led to a man named Ananias, disciple of Jesus, who healed his blindness, and baptized him. Immediately, St Paul started to preach about Jesus in the synagogues.

⁷ Acts, VII, 59.

⁸ Acts, VIII, 1.

⁹ Acts, IX, 1-2.

¹⁰ Acts, IX, 3-8.

3. Theological reflexion upon St Paul's conversion

St Paul's conversion marks the transformation of the terrible persecutor into a privileged apostle. This transformation happened suddenly, and this is to be noticed: no transition in between the two status St Paul passed from one to another.

New direction, new vocation, but without denying his jewish past. Instead, St Paul went deeper in his knowledge, seeing in Christ the fulfilment of the prophecies, and the fulness of the Revelation. Jesus seized him! St Paul was forced, but in a smooth way, and he willingly and lovingly embraced the faith. St Paul kept his full free will. "The grace of God has the strength, but never forces"¹¹.

This appearance of violence of the conversion is shown in St Paul's attitude: he falls on the ground, he, the impassioned, the irascible, is led by someone. However, he tried to resist: "It is hard for thee to kick against the goad."¹²

Human people can be scared and exultant at the same time, because the divine is invading them, because they're afraid to lose everything to find themselves.

But Saul can't resist: the grace overflows him, leaving him completely free.

This conversion is also a Revelation: Saul saw Christ interiorly. It's much more than a simple apparition. There is undoubtedly an interior illumination: the Revelation of the Mystery of Christ, being made in the intimacy of the soul, communicated in one instant, like a lightning, in a global intuition.

In One instant, St Paul receives and makes him the Revelation of the Christian mystery and the Humanity of Christ. Revelation is total and global. Of course, later, there was time to go deeper into the fulness of the mystery, but everything is there already, ready to be developed.

The first thing St Paul learned is the Resurrection of Christ: not only that Jesus came back to life after his Sacrifice, but also all the Redemption and the universal salvation through the mystery of Christ, living in all his members. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest".

This Jesus, he was hating until them, is truly the Son of God, who went back to His Father after the Resurrection, and living in power and glory, spreads over the Church his grace, and the Church is united to the Same Jesus.

The old man, very enthusiastic, but caught in the chains of the Law, was walking towards Damascus, but felt on the ground, was reborn, new and open to Christ, who brought to him the freedom of the sons of God. Now he fully realised what is freedom, he's free because of the liberty received from the Truth, free because of the Gospel and the grace. The same freedom given to the adoptive sons.

The conversion of St Paul was his Pentecost. As he met Christ in the glory of his Resurrection, St Paul became a witness of the Resurrection, like the other Apostles. It's his personal Pentecost, giving him the title of Apostle, and hi mission, with the two great gifts:

- Holiness

¹¹ Cardinal Luciani, future Pope John-Paul 1st.

¹² Acts, IX, 5.

- Perfect knowledge of the Revelation. St Paul received the charism of infallibility, like the other Apostles. But this charism wasn't transmissible, except for the successor of St Peter.

St Paul is truly an apostle, and not only with the common meaning of a delegated missionary.

St Peter was the Apostle for the Jews. St Paul will be for the Gentiles. All along his missionary journeys, he will preach Christ, and Christ only. Christ with His individual personality, but also with His universal mediation. Christ is the unique bond who reconciles men with God, and came into this world to save them, and to aggregate them to His mystical body. From his conversion, St Paul understands that it's only through Jesus-Christ that God touches man, and man is united to God

After this illumination, Saul was led to Ananias who imposed hands to him, healed him from his temporary blindness, and baptized him. After a few days spent in Damascus, preaching the Gospel, he retired himself in the desert of Arabia, where he spent one or two years, meditating the Gospel he received.

After this retreat, he started his missions and apostolate throughout Asia, Greece, and finally Rome.

4. St Paul: his missions

Four trips and notified in the Acts about St Paul's Missions.



- 1. Antioch – Salamis – Paphos – Pisidia – Iconium – Phamphyliya – Antioch.

- 2. Antioch – Tarsus – Derbe – Troas – Philippi – Tessaonia – Athens – Corinth – Ephesus – Caesarea. Jerusalem – Antioch.
- 3. Antioch – Tarsus – Iconium – Ephesus – Smyrna – Pergamum – Philippi – Tessaonia – Athens – Corinth – Berea – Philippi – Troas – Tyre – Caesarea – Joppa – Jerusalem.
- 4. Journey to Rome, as a prisoner

A. 1st Trip (Acts XIII-XIV)

As they were celebrating the holy mysteries, the Holy Ghost manifested God's will "for the work where unto the Lord have taken them."¹³ Accompanied by Barnabas, St Paul left Antioch.

With St Marc the Evangelist, they boarded a ship to Cyprus. This island was Barnabas' homeland. It was well-known for being fertile especially for its vineyards. It also counted numerous jewish communities.

St Paul encountered here one the most famous opposition the Apostles faced, with the intervention of Elymas the magician. To punish this evil man, St Paul made him blind for a while. This miracle forced the conversion of the roman proconsul, who attended this scene. It's also from this moment St Paul dropped his jewish name, Saul, for his roman name, Paul.

After this predication, St Paul boarded again to stop in Pamphilia, but didn't stayed long there, because of the hostility of the area. They crossed the mountains of Taurus, to get to Antioch of Pisidia. But Mark, refusing to go further, left his companions, and went back to Jerusalem. He became later the secretary of St Peter.

As usual they went to the synagogue to preach. Three parts in this speech¹⁴:

- First part sounds like St Stephen's speech: History of the chosen people, preparation for the Messiah to come, promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, exodus, Canaan's conquest, the Judges, the Kings, and the predication of John the Baptist.
- Second part looks like more to St Peter's: Jesus is the Messiah, who was promised to Israel. St Paul insisted upon His Resurrection.
- Third part is also like St Peter's: it is a clear invitation for the Act of Faith. St Paul urges the people to adhere like he did, developing many ideas, such as the remission of the sins by Jesus, the lacks of Moses' law, the justification by the Faith.

The week after, St Paul preached again before a larger congregation, and despite the opposition it created, they encounter a large success. However, the anger of the Jews being too strong, they left the city for Iconium.

Here again, their predication in the synagogue was successful, but they nearly escaped of being stoned, and were forced to leave. They continued their predication throughout Galatia, helped with miracles and numerous conversions.

Once again, the Jews, moved by anger, came to search him, and stoned St Paul, leaving him like dead. His disciples found him, and after the healing of his wounds, he came back to Antioch, where he stayed with his companions.

¹³ Act, XIII, 2.

¹⁴ Acts, XIII, 16-41.

B. The first Ecumenical Council: the Council of Jerusalem (Acts, XV, 1-35)

What was the necessity?

Jesus never formally abrogated Moses' Law. He faithfully fulfilled it, as well as His disciples, even if He rejected the traditions imposed by the pharisees.

The first Christians were all born Jewish, and therefore continued to practice the Law, received from their fathers.

Problems: with a growing community, and the predication of St Paul, non-Jewish people were becoming Christians. Being Gentiles, they remained impure for the first. Being Gentiles, they were reluctant to also become Jews.

Moses' Law protected the chosen people from any pagan influence in the past. But it started to become a threat for the unity of the Church, and an obstacle for the conversions of the pagans.

It seems St Stephen saw the danger, and the visions of St Paul and St Peter¹⁵ were showing the clear will of God regarding that matter.

But the diffusion of the Gospel troubled a small group of Jews, who came from Jerusalem to Antioch, to claim the circumcision for all newly baptized pagans.

The future of the Church was in danger: would she be only a sort of sect within the Jewish religion? Moreover, the Faith itself was in danger: to place as an absolute the requirement of Moses' Law for salvation is a virtual negation of the temporary aspect of this law, as well as rejecting somehow the redemption, the Blood and merits of Christ. That was putting upside down the fundamental dogma of the Catholic Faith.

St Paul and Barnabas rejected this, and were sent to Jerusalem to speak with the Apostles, who only could have the last word about this.

They told the Apostles about the beautiful fruits of their predication during their first journey amongst the Gentiles and pagans. Immediately, some claimed Moses' Law was also to be fulfilled by these new converts.

The Apostles present in Jerusalem, Peter, James and John, met with St Paul, Barnabas and other priests in Jerusalem. St Paul's Gospel was fully approved, and Moses' Law abandoned.

Then St Peter spoke to the people, reminding them that it was only through the grace of Christ that both Jews and Gentiles were saved. Therefore, the Law and circumcision no longer had this power of salvation.

"They, who from among the Gentiles are converted to God, are not to be disquieted"¹⁶. St James, following St Peter's speech published then the conclusion of what is known as the First Ecumenical Council.

¹⁵ Acts, X, 11-15.

¹⁶ Acts, XV, 19.

To preserve unity, and as an act of Charity for their brothers coming from the jews, it was asked the Gentiles who were converted to “refrain themselves from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.”¹⁷

Four interdictions:

- Contamination from idols: the meat consecrated to idols were never to be touched, because they are impure for the Jews. Here is the risk of scandal for the weak (cf St Paul’s teaching in II Cor., VIII; X, 14-33)
- Fornication: was already forbidden by natural law, but in pagan world and moral was tolerated. Necessity to go back to a real moral order.
- Third and Fourth interdictions are linked: blood was believed as being the place of life, and life belongs to God only. Therefore, blood, and any animal killed and not bled was not to be touched. Here again the risk of scandal of the weak.

We can see here the care of the Apostles for the Unity of the Church: those interdictions are from a relative necessity, imposed by circumstances to maintain good harmony between Christian brothers coming from different origins. Now, only the second of these interdictions remains in force.

¹⁷ Acts, XV 20.