

FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL

(Acts 22:3-16; Psalm 117; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 16:15-18)

Pope Benedict XVI has declared June 2008 to June 2009 the *Year of St. Paul*. In doing so he stated that this special year presents us with an opportunity to learn more about the man, Paul of Tarsus, who is called the great Apostle to the gentiles, and his message.

In fact, Pope Benedict chose to establish this special “Pauline Year” so that we could listen to him and learn today from him, as our teacher, “the faith and the truth in which the reasons for unity among Christ’s disciples are rooted. The description ‘teacher of the Gentiles’ opens to the future, to all peoples and all generations. For us Paul is not only a figure of the past who we remember with veneration. He is also our teacher, an Apostle and herald of Jesus Christ for us too.”

Sr. Teresita Kambeitz OSU, who followed the footsteps of St. Paul recently in and around Greece, speaks not so much of the conversion of St. Paul but of his transformation through his encounter with the Risen Lord. Paul was a devout Jew, born in Cilicia in present day Turkey. As he states himself in the first reading, “I was brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God.” At the end of his life he was to say of himself: “For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle... a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.” The bottom line is that Paul was transformed by his encounter with the Risen Lord.

If we are to be disciples of Jesus, then we must also encounter the Risen Lord and be open to inner transformation. In the first reading today, Ananias explains to Paul what happened to him, and what needs to happen to us. “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard.”

The key is to see Jesus and hear his voice. In short, we must also encounter him in our own lives. Pope Benedict, during the opening ceremony for the *Year of St. Paul* and in his subsequent audiences since then, picks up a central theme from St. Paul in that Christianity is not just a new moral code or a philosophy, but an encounter with a person.

He stresses that Paul’s experience has implications for the faithful of today. “We are Christians only if we encounter Christ.” the pope states. “Of course he does not show himself to us in that irresistible, luminous way, as he did with Paul to make him Apostle of the Gentiles. However, we can also encounter Christ in the reading of sacred Scripture, in prayer and in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ’s heart and feel him touch ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One, do we really become Christians.”

Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr wrote in the *Living With Christ* on this feast some years back the following, “Scripture tells us that Jesus showed us in many convincing ways that he was alive after he rose from the grave. Now it is our turn to show in many convincing ways

that he is alive in us. The gospel, the Good News, we are to proclaim is that our lives have been changed because of the One who lives on in us and continues to rise from the tombs of our lives. To be alive means more than taking up bodily space in this world. Am I truly alive with the life of Christ? Has my life changed because I have known Jesus in the scriptures, in the sacraments, in others, and in the depths of my own heart?"

The New Interpreters Bible adds the following thoughts: "Despite the appearance narrative, resurrection faith remains dependent upon the Word of Jesus and the disciples' experience of the power of God that is active through Jesus. The disciples were all reduced to fearful silence. Nevertheless, God brings faith out of just such weakness and failure. Jesus did not need to come again and choose a new team in some grand lottery for better disciples. Despite all the appearances, Jesus did accomplish the will of God through suffering on the cross. However imperfect our faith and however many times we remain silent when we should testify to the gospel, we can always return to the Lord. None of us can get so far away from Jesus that we cannot be touched by God's healing presence."

Someone whose life was transformed by Jesus is Violet. She had been estranged from her very abusive husband for years, for her own safety. One day he severely verbally abused her over the phone. Formerly, such an incident would have thrown her into total confusion. Her recent involvement with the church, however, had helped her to meet Jesus. She had taken a Christopher Leadership course, a Cursillo weekend and had completed a year long study of the lay formation program entitled *Builders of a New Earth*. In the process she had learned to "communicate with love" based on the teaching of Jesus in Mt 18:15 ("If your brother wrongs you, go to him alone *and tell him how you feel.*") and Mt 5:44 ("Love your enemies."). So instead of acting out of anger, she wrote a letter to her husband describing what he had said, and expressing her feelings of hurt and anger in a positive manner, with love. Then she went with her daughter to deliver the letter to him at a meeting he was attending.

His reaction upon reading the letter was to stand there, open mouthed and speechless, then he said simply "Okay" and returned to the meeting. Her daughter said with awe in her voice, "Mom." She had never seen her mother relate to her father in this way before – it has always been a fight. Returning home, Violet was filled with a mysterious joy. Sorting out her emotions afterwards with the help of her pastor, she realized what she had done - she had loved her enemy, had communicated with love, had actually forgiven him in the process and was free from fear, anger and resentment.

With excitement, he pointed out that she was experiencing the signs that Jesus told the disciples would accompany them in today's gospel: "They will speak a new language, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison."

She had taken up this potentially dangerous incident and had dealt with it positively. In writing that letter she had picked up a deadly snake and it had not harmed her. In delivering the letter to her abuser she drank deadly poison and it did not hurt her. In

communicating her feelings to her estranged husband with love, she had used a new language so effectively that her daughter marveled at her. In the end she had cast out the demon of fear, anger and codependency from her life. She was truly a disciple who was experiencing the reign of God and the power of the resurrection in her life.

Mark has insisted that the cross is the way to life for those who wish to follow Jesus. He does not compromise the paradox of suffering service by producing a glorious triumph in the end. Instead, the reader must learn that the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross has broken apart the old order of evil and initiated the rule of God. Baptism is a sign of union with and commitment to Christ, by being joined and committed to his Body, the Church. It is a commitment to living this new way of life and speaking this new language of love that Jesus taught his disciples and modeled for us.

The Eucharist that we now celebrate makes present for us this powerful love of Christ shown to us on the Cross. When we celebrate it with faith, it has the power to transform us into his Body, his disciples, sent out to love the world through selfless service and unconditional love.

May we follow the example of St. Paul and let our encounter with the Risen Lord transform us into his witnesses to all the world.