

Good morning

This morning we celebrate the Conversion of Paul, this is an important day because conversion runs alongside and supplements the fact that our faith is based on the resurrection, the living Christ raised again.

Through that sacrifice and resurrection we know everything we say and everything we believe in is built upon one fundamental and revolutionary premise:

We don't have to stay the way we are. God can radically change our lives.

Conversion is a miracle that happens when God intersects with human beings. Once God enters the picture, your life will never be the same again. Until then, you may be religious and you may be a very good person and you may obey all the rules of the church, but you have not been converted.

Religion is one thing; conversion is something else entirely. It is the conviction that long-held prejudices can be overcome, lifetime habits can be broken, and deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour can be erased over time. Conversion is the certainty that what you were does not determine what you are, and what you

are does not determine what you will be. You can be changed, you can be different, your life can move in an entirely new direction.

If you take that truth away from Christianity, if the possibility of real change is gone, then we have nothing to offer but a set of rules. Can the leopard change his spots? In himself and by himself, then no the leopard can never change his spots, but with God all things are possible.

Of all the conversion stories in the Bible, none is greater or more profound than the conversion of the man called Saul of Tarsus. Raised a Jew, trained as a rabbi, he became a violent persecutor of the early Christian church. He hated Christ and his followers so much that he did his best to eradicate the new religion as if it were some sort of dreaded virus. He was a terrorist who did his evil deeds in the name of the God of the Bible.

One day he met Jesus and his life was permanently transformed. So bad was his reputation that at first almost no one believed that the change was real. Word quickly spread that Saul the persecutor had come to Christ. Over time he proved to be genuine in his faith. What happened to him made such an impact that the New Testament contains three separate accounts of his dramatic conversion.

Paul's story is important because unlike many stories about conversion, those stories we often hear about where the person involved had hit rock bottom, when they had hit terrible personal tragedies, when they seem to lose all hope, then Christ enters their life and all changes.

Paul has a very different story. Before Paul came to Christ, he was perfectly happy in his career as a rising Jewish leader and an avid Christian-hater.

He felt no remorse over his persecution of the followers of Christ, and in fact regarded it as his service to God. He had no desire to come to Christ and felt no need in his heart.

His religion satisfied him in every way and he saw no need for anything else. Was Paul interested in becoming a Christian? How many ways can you say no? He wasn't looking for Christ ... in fact almost the opposite.

This is a man who was set on murdering as many Christians as possible. He approved of the stoning of Stephen and when other Christians were put to death, he cast his vote against them. In his mind, the best way to defeat Christianity was to kill all the Christians.

In his zeal he had no peer—either as a student of the Law of Moses or as a fierce opponent of the church of God.

He was a religious fanatic, a bigot, a zealot, and a man wholly given over to his hatred of Christians. He would stop at nothing to prevent this new movement from spreading.

Paul was happy with the way his life was going. He wasn't seeking anything—except more Christians to throw in prison. He had no sense of his need of salvation and no inner voice calling him to come to Christ. It would be hard to imagine a more hopeless case. Why bother praying for a man like that? He'll never be saved.

Or so it would seem.

He was totally convinced he was right.

He was totally convinced Christians were wrong.

He hated Christianity and he loved Judaism.

He enjoyed his life and wasn't looking for something better.

Christ came into Paul's life without permission. He didn't wait to be asked. While Saul was on the road to Damascus, Christ came in because he wanted to come in. He chose to come in. He entered without knocking, he didn't ask and wait. This is pure saving

grace

If he had waited for an invitation, Paul would never have been saved. Salvation begins with Christ—not with us!

When Christ calls a man like this, he responds, he comes, he obeys.

Christ overcomes our reluctance, knocks down all our excuses, and slowly but surely draws us to closer. We aren't aware of it. From our side, we are "accepting Christ" and "believing in Christ" and "trusting in Christ."

The conversion of Paul gives us an amazing picture of the transforming grace of Christ.

Once Paul hated believers. Now he seeks their fellowship.

Once he hated the truth. Now he lives by the truth.

Once he hated the gospel. Now he preaches the gospel.

Once he was called Saul; now he is called Paul.

Same man, new man.

Everything is different now.

Christ has made all the difference.

There are two important things to take away from this; one is that no one is beyond the reach of Christ's grace. Surely if Christ can save a man like Paul, he

can save anyone, no matter how far we have strayed, no matter how base we have become.

The second is that this story ought to encourage us who are praying for friends and loved ones who feel they are doing very well without faith, or pray for situations that seem hopeless.

Often our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling. We pray for months and for years with no apparent result. But this story is a reason to continue to hope and not to despair. What we see is not the whole story.

No one would ever have predicted Paul's conversion. Ten minutes before it happened, it seemed impossible. Five minutes before it happened, no one had any reason to expect anything. Ten seconds before the light broke and the voice spoke, Paul's heart was as hard as ever.

But then there was Christ!

So keep on praying, keep on believing, keep on.

You never know what Christ will do next.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord

We thank you for your saving grace,
for your presence in our world.

For the love you show us,
regardless of what we have done
and who we have been,
but showing us what we can become,
with your saving grace.

Amen