

***A sermon preached by Emma Hodge at St. Michael & All Angels Church,
Sandhurst on 24th January 2021.***

In the name of the Father, and of the son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen

Tomorrow sees the commemoration of two great people, both writers and both have had an influence on lots of people in different countries.

The first is an eighteenth century poet from Scotland called Robert Burns and the second is a first century writer from Turkey who is depicted in a window in our north aisle and is St. Paul.

I'll come back to Robert Burns in a few minutes; but first, St. Paul.

St Paul was a small man and he was brought up in a Jewish home and studied under a well-known Jewish teacher – Gamliel and then he became a Pharisee.

Pharisees were a group of lay people who kept observance to both the written and oral law and that the law was open to their interpretation of it. Pharisees felt that individual prayer and study was important and the application of priestly laws also applied to non-priests and were strict about the application of the law to their lives.

St. Paul had made it his mission to persecute and imprison Christians and had requested and received a letter of authorisation from the High Priest giving him the authority to imprison men and women who were Christians and take them to Jerusalem.

St Paul then had a life-changing experience when he met a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. He then became temporarily blind and his travelling companions led him to a house in Damascus and a Christian called Ananias was sent to him where his sight was restored and St. Paul was baptised and became a Christian. This story is told in Acts chapter 9.

However our New Testament reading tonight is from Acts Chapter 22 and this is where St. Paul gives an account of his Damascus road experience in defence of his action. Several years have passed since St. Paul had the Damascus road experience and first became a Christian and during this time, he has completed three missionary journeys and had written some of the letters to the churches which he founded; some of which are in our New Testament.

When Paul met a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, his life changed.

Before St. Paul's conversion, he was an important person, not everyone could approach the high priest and request his authorisation, but Paul not only asked

for authority, he also received the letter of authorisation to imprison Christians he found on his journey.

After St. Paul's conversion, he had to be reliant on other people.

Firstly he was reliant on his travelling companions to take him to the correct house in Damascus; secondly he had to be reliant on Ananias to obey God and for Ananias to meet Paul, thirdly he had to be reliant on God, to restore his sight, through Ananias and lastly he had to be reliant on other Christians to vouch for him, and that he had changed from persecutor to fellow Christian and that it was safe to meet with St. Paul.

From the early days following his conversion, Paul was a keen public speaker, preaching about Jesus, however his message was not always welcomed and on several occasions he and his companions found themselves facing an angry mob of people.

And it is after one such encounter in Jerusalem that Paul is arrested and has to defend his faith and his defence includes the account of his conversion and it this is the passage we heard tonight.

Paul uses his skill and experience as a public speaker to quieten the angry mob and he addresses the mob in Hebrew.

The language that most people spoke in Jerusalem at the time for day to day conversations would have been Aramaic. Hebrew was used by Jews when they read from scripture and was used in formal Jewish proceedings, by speaking in Hebrew, Paul carefully forced his audience to listen to him as he not only tells people that he was a Jew but he proves it by speaking Hebrew.

The passage we heard tonight stops after the account of Paul's baptism, but this is not the end of the account of St. Paul's defence of his faith. Paul continues speaking and then Paul upsets the crowd which then draws the attention of the Roman commander and the Roman commander orders Paul to be taken into his barracks to be questioned in detail and flogged. This is not the only time in Paul's life as a Christian which he finds himself in prison.

St. Paul is known for his missionary journeys, for writing letters to the churches which he established, several of which are in our New Testament, and for encouraging fellow Christians.

St. Paul is also a controversial figure, he had strong views and opinions on various topics and especially the role of women, which contradict to Jesus' own actions and words on the topic.

However whatever your view on St. Paul is, his legacy is the spreading of faith and the New Testament letters which we are able to read and study.

If we now turn to Robert Burns, someone who was very different from St. Paul, Robert Burns travelled around Scotland and wrote poems and songs about the people in his community and everyday life.

Robert Burns legacy is the poems and songs which he wrote.

St. Paul and Robert Burns, through their writing, showed all who read them what their beliefs and attitudes are and they also often encouraged other people.

If you watched or read President Biden's inauguration speech you may have picked up on the theme of legacy that was mentioned in both the legacies that we have inherited from previous people, and the legacies which we leave future generations. He quoted from a song called "*American Anthem*" which contained these lines "*what shall our legacy be, what will our children say*".

Legacies are not limited, anyone can leave a legacy to other people, the legacies are the words and actions that we do every day which leave a lasting impression on other people, and that could just be a member of our family or a friend.

Each one of us are able to show others what our beliefs and attitudes are, and to encourage others.

So tomorrow, when you raise a 'wee dram' to Robert Burns, also remember St. Paul and all the other people who have helped you along the way and reflect what your legacy will be and who you can encourage along the way.

Amen.