

Paul the breaker of boundaries by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 27th January 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Evensong)

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 21:40-22:22

Introduction: famous for what?

Can anyone tell me the name of a former Director of Music at Cheltenham Ladies' College, who served with the Queen's Westminster Rifles in Flanders from 1917-19, studied conducting with Adrian Boult, was a friend of the composers Vaughan Williams, Herbert Howells and Gerald Finzi and was Organist at Gloucester Cathedral for 39 years?

Answer: Herbert Sumsion, who composed this evening's Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis.

I didn't know anything about his life and career before I looked him up on the internet. For us, and for other choirs, it is his work that is his legacy. I wonder what will be my legacy when I die? What will be yours?

Paul's life

- Born in Tarsus, a Roman citizen
- Probably well-off family with connections in Jerusalem
- Studied under famous rabbi Gamaliel
- Familiar with Greek culture and literature
- A Pharisee, and a strict adherent to the Law

Paul's legacy

You might have thought that with Paul's detailed knowledge of Judaism he'd have been the ideal person, once he'd become a follower of Jesus as Messiah, to work with his fellow-Jews to win them over to the new stream of Judaism which was later given the label "Christianity".

Certainly, Paul always visited the Jewish synagogue when he arrived in a new place, and sought to persuade his fellow-Jews from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. His efforts met with mixed responses. Some of his fellow-Jews joined him, and later became leaders in the churches he founded and fellow-missionaries. But Paul also antagonised many other Jews, and frequently found himself hounded out of town. For all his many qualities, he seems to have managed to rub some people up the wrong way.

What Paul in fact became known as was "the apostle to the Gentiles". His greatest achievement was to see the bigger picture and realise that God's purposes to reach the whole world with the gospel meant that adherence to Jewish rules and regulations could no longer be a requirement for new believers. Drawing on his early life in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus, his knowledge of Greek philosophy and his Roman citizenship, Paul was able to distinguish the essentials of the gospel message from its cultural packaging of Judaism and make it available to a universal audience. That is why today there are 2.4 billion Christians on the planet, compared to 14.5 million practising Jews¹.

Many people think that Paul changed his name from Saul to Paul to reflect his conversion. This is false. In fact, he continued to be known as Saul for at least 13 years after his

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_religious_groups#Religious_demographics

conversion. If you read Acts, you will see that he starts using the name Paul on his first missionary journey to Cyprus and the territory we now call Turkey. Saul is a very Jewish name, whereas Paul (Paulus) is quintessentially Roman. In his own words, Paul tried to be “all things to all people, that I might by all means save some”. (1 Corinthians 9:22)

In opening up Christianity to everyone, regardless of race or background, Paul faced opposition, both within the church and from other traditional adherents of Judaism, as we heard in tonight’s reading from Acts. He survived many attempts on his life, and several years of imprisonment as a result.

Paul’s motivation

I find Paul’s farewell address to the leaders of the church in Ephesus very moving and inspiring.

²² And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. ²⁴ But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace. (Acts 20:22-24).

So what changed Saul the Pharisee to Saul the Christian and Paul the apostle to the Gentiles?

I think it can be summed up in one word: Grace – God’s undeserved, unconditional love. The conversion of Saul’s mind came when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and realised that he had been wrong. But the conversion of his heart came as he meditated on that experience, as he recognised that the Jesus he had been persecuting had died to forgive his sins, accepted him and had a new purpose for his life.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 (NRSV)

Saul’s first experience of that grace came through the disciple Ananias, who overcame his fears and went to find Saul in Damascus. In his blindness and confusion, Saul remembered the first words he heard Ananias speak:

“Brother Saul, regain your sight!” (Acts 22:13, cp Acts 9:17)

Through Ananias, Saul experienced the love of Christ, and his motivation from then on was to follow Jesus and enable others also to experience his grace. Years later he wrote:

“This life that I live now I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave up his life for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Conclusion

What will you and I be remembered for when our time on earth is up? What are the sources of your inspiration and motivation? What will be our legacy in the lives of those we know and those we have influenced? It would be nice to be able to say that we have left this world a better place than we found it. I hope at least that people will say of me that I left it a better place than it would have been without me. But I know that will only be possible if God’s grace has been shared with others, even if only a little, through my life.