

HUMILITY AND CHANGE

The Conversion of St Paul

Sunday January 25th 2015

St. Michael, Cornhill

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Over the past three decades, Douglas Hurd (Lord Hurd of Westwell to his friends), one of our most distinguished recent Foreign Secretaries, has written a stream of books – thrillers, political analysis and at least two fine biographies. He's done this in his spare time! Recently he's written on Disraeli, of whom he disapproves but is fair, and then of Robert Peel - less immediately attractive in terms of charisma and 'gift of the gab', but hugely impressive in his integrity and what he achieved.

Towards the end of the book, we read of Peel's fatal riding accident in Hyde Park. He survives, with profound injuries, but dies at his home, three days later – on the site of the present Ministry of Defence Building. He dies a painful and lingering death in 1850, still only 62 years old. Hurd tells us of the crowd of poor people who surrounded his house over those three days, praying for him and his family. Hurd makes the point that none of these people would have benefited from Robert Peel's reforms in their lifetime, but somehow, in their hearts they knew Peel was a good and great man.

Part of his greatness was his utter integrity and conviction combined with his preparedness to *change his mind*. That requires humility. Two instances convey the point. Early on, Peel was clear that with an Established Church, Roman Catholics should not stand for Parliament or hold public office, and so on. As he thought further and discussed with others, so he became equally convinced that things should change. So in 1829, it was Peel who, with some tough opposition piloted the *Catholic Emancipation Act* through Parliament. Some seventeen years later – in the face of grim opposition from his own party Peel led the battle to repeal the Corn Laws.

Now, I've spent time with Peel, since what underpinned his conscience and integrity was his profound Christian faith. Today, of course, we celebrate another individual who experienced an equally profound turnaround in his belief. We celebrate the *Conversion of St. Paul*. Paul too was a man of determination and conviction. Indeed his persecution of the tiny, even embryonic Christian Church was motivated by his certainty that this new faith was perverting the way to God. What was it that convinced him otherwise? From the letter to the Galatians we heard it directly from Paul's own pen:

'I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin . . . I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.'

We all know the story of Paul's conversion. It is set out for us three times in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul is struck blind. He is humiliated. He goes out of circulation for a time. Think back then too to the call of Jeremiah. There's a similar sense of humility expressed there. 'Ah, Lord God', Jeremiah cries, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' At the heart of such changes of mind is the acceptance of a true humility which may even mean in exaggerated cases – real humiliation. Peel was humiliated. He split his party, he never returned to power; his

party remained in the wilderness for twenty years. But his conscience told him he had to change his mind.

All this stands very close to the heart of the Christian gospel. For, in Jesus, we see this in its most extreme form. As in Isaiah's 'suffering servant', he is 'despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.' Jesus' path will mean crucifixion and death. There can be no greater humiliation, or required humility. Now, humility finds its roots in the word humus, the soil. The soil is taken for granted, trodden on. But, of course, it is essential to our existence. Here, then, lies the clue to a real understanding of Paul's conversion.

Often Paul's remarkable story is used simply to imply that every one of us needs to have what's been called a 'Damascus Road Experience'. We all need to be able to point to *one* moment of conversion, one moment when the penny dropped or the ice broke. But I remember two rather different stories which suggest the opposite. In his engaging biographical memoir, Alec Douglas-Home, sometime Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister recalls: 'I was challenged in the street once by a young man; he asked me, "Have you been saved?" I replied, 'I think I may have been, but if I have it is by such a whisker that I dare not boast about it.'

On a similar note, Brother Michael, the charismatic Minister General of the Anglican Franciscans reflected, 'Yes, I have been converted, and normally it happens at least twenty or thirty times each day.' So conversion means acknowledging a necessary humility to live our daily lives. By God's grace we are converted every time we respond positively to a moral or spiritual challenge. So, at the heart of conversion, lies the grace of God giving us the humility to change our minds. That is the powerful message of Paul's remarkable experience. As with Paul, so with each of us: 'The Gospel received is not of human origin, we receive it through a revelation of Jesus Christ, that is - by the grace of God.'

Amen

Readings

Jeremiah. 1. 4-10

Galations. 1. 11-16

Matthew. 19. 27-end