

Sermon: St Paul 2011

I went round to my butcher in Smithfield on Friday morning for some belly pork and saw the City workers buying in their lumps of haggis to celebrate something called “Burns Night”. Then I was walking down Cheapside behind two young City types. One of them broke off his solipsistic jabber on his portable phone to say to the real person beside him: *I’ve never been to a Burns Night party before. I hope we don’t have to listen to any poetry.* But the end of January gives us a far superior reason for rejoicing. It is the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul.

Paul is one of God’s supreme miracles and acts of grace. He is second only to Jesus Christ himself in the history of Christianity. Consider this: it was St Paul and not the gospel writers who first gave us those words from the Last Supper, *In the same night that he was betrayed he took bread...Likewise after supper he took the cup...* Paul was the greatest of all the Christian teachers. He was the biggest influence on the Catholic St Augustine and on the Protestant Martin Luther. Paul’s teaching that life is a crisis demanding decision is even at the centre of the philosophy of atheistic existentialists

It was Paul who defined in words of one syllable the human predicament: *The thing I do, that I would not; and the thing I would not, that I do.* Many philosophers had said the problem with us human beings is our passions which run away with us. We will one thing, but our desires throw us of course. But Paul realised that the fault does not originate in the passions but in the will itself. We consist of contradictory volitions. We really are divided selves.

As a Greek-speaking Pharisee, he had read deeply not only into the Old Testament but into the classics of Greek literature. He was the genius who tried to fuse all these influences together. He couldn’t do it. It was only after his prolonged meditation on the Person of Christ that he made sense of our divided selves. So here he quotes Euripides from the 5th century BC: *We know the good; we apprehend it clearly: But we cannot bring it to fruition.* It is a truth repeated by Paul’s near contemporary, Ovid who said *I see and approve better things, but follow worse.* Isn’t that what you do, if you’re honest? And isn’t it what I do? And the result is a sense of self-disgust. What Paul calls a sense of sin. This is the beginning of Christianity. In the Old Testament, God said, *Be good!* And we find we can’t be good. Paul expressed this conclusively: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* This is a punning piece of poetry – a metaphor taken from the Greek archery contests. The Greek word for *sins* is *hamartia*. And in the archery contests that’s what they called the arrows which fell short of the target, *hamartia*. So to sin is to fall short.

We cannot save ourselves. We cannot rescue a coherent self from our divided self. So God has to find another remedy and this remedy is spelt out and named by St Paul: it is Christ crucified. He drives home this wonderful news of our salvation in the most beautiful and exalted prose:

Abraham had faith and God imputed it to him as righteousness. For us also it shall be imputed if we believe on him that raised up Jesus Our Lord from the dead. Who was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification. Therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The divided self produces in us anxiety, *Angst*. We are not at ease with ourselves. We find we become dissatisfied. Like Hamlet we can even find the whole of life and experience *a foul and pestilential congregation of vapours*. In loneliness. In our need for love and, when we don't find it, our thrashing around in so many false substitutes for love. Compounded by the frustration that this leads to. What C.S. Lewis described as *an ever increasing craving for an ever decreasing pleasure*. Or in the dark hours the restless mind runs on. In bad dreams even. We can even be anxious in our sleep. This is when we can turn to St Paul's glorious *Epistle to the Romans* and find rest:

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ who died, yea rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Nay in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

He had a fully incarnated physical presence: he asks for his books and his cloak; and he tells us to stop drinking water and take some wine. He has a besetting sin – his *thorn in the flesh* – and he is outrageous enough to believe that God has afflicted him with this besetting sin in order to stop him getting too big for his boots. He got too big for his boots anyway; but he knew the cure – he coined the phrase himself – *charity shall cover the multitude of sins*.

St Paul was no stained glass saint but a real flesh and blood man, passionate, emotionally charged, requiring love. In jail in Rome he writes imploringly to Timothy:

Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me. For Demas hath forsaken me and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia; Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me...

Paul so often gives us the sense of his close physical presence. How movingly he writes to the Galatians: *Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand...*

Even in prison in Rome, in danger of execution, he finds vivid opportunities to teach the gospel:

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness. And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This is Paul in his prison cell. There's no doubt he was looking through the grille at the Roman soldier standing guard: at his breastplate, his shoes, shield, helmet and sword. He doesn't preach abstractions but, by using the physical reality which he sees around him, – even using the threatening reality of military detention to teach us the truth that makes us free.

For all his great learning, St Paul is not the ponderous didactic professor. He is the supreme poet of mystical insight. There is this:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am becoming as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal...Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know, even as I am known.

And then there is a gaiety which Henry Purcell put marvellously into music:

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice...Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Is it comfort and reassurance you need?

For now is Christ risen and become the first fruits of them that slept..for since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead...For as in Adam all men die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.

For this corruptible must out on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?

Finally, this is how deep St Paul's love for Jesus Christ went. His body even took on the imprint of the nails, and he says:

From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.