

Damascus Experience. Sermon. Fr. Hugh.

St. George. 4/18/2010. Acts 9:1-19. Easter 3C.

A man saw a book on the shelf at Barnes & Noble, entitled,

“How to be the man of your own house!”

He thought ‘this is exactly what I need.’

He bought the book and read it from cover to cover in one sitting.

Then he got up, looked his wife firmly in the eye and announced, “From now on, you need to know that I am the man of this house and whatever I say goes.”

“To begin with you will prepare me a gourmet meal tonight, ending with a delicious dessert.

“Afterwards, you are going to draw me a bath so I can relax. You will wash my back and towel me dry and bring me my robe.

And whenever I come in from Golf you will give me a foot massage.

“And from now you’re not going to waste money getting your hair done at the beauty salon. I won’t waste money at the barber’s either. So guess who’s going to cut my hair tomorrow?”

The wife replied, “Hmm. I guess that would be the funeral director!”

This morning's reading from Acts tells us of one of the most dramatic spiritual experiences ever recorded. The conversion of Saul, handpicked by God to become St. Paul, one of the two great founding fathers of the Church and the man who contributed more to the New Testament than any other author.

In this phenomenal encounter, the Lord transformed the character of the man who had viciously opposed God's work and had murdered several Christians, into the man who would have the most extraordinary powerful impact on the spread of the Christian faith.

Daniel Boorstin, a historian, had this to say about St. Paul:

“The true watersheds of human history are seldom spotted quickly amid the tumult of the headlines broadcast every hour. Contemporary historians did not deem Paul of Tarsus worthy of mention, and had no inkling of how great a tentmaker he was.

They could not have known that he was erecting the theological tent of Christianity, making it broad enough to accommodate all manner of people, to girdle the globe and to survive two millennia as a major force in history.”

One of the more influential writers of the last century was C.S.Lewis, professor at Oxford University. As a young man with a brilliant mind, Lewis became an atheist.

However, he was puzzled as to why a number of intelligent people that he liked, and authors whose work he admired, were in fact Christians.

Lewis set out to analyze Christianity, with the clear objective of exposing it as an untenable philosophy. The more he researched, however, the more Lewis found to his dismay that he was fully persuaded. He described himself as the “most reluctant convert in all of England.”

C.S. Lewis’s books are still very popular and have in turn been the catalyst for many people’s conversions.

One man who was deeply affected by Lewis's book 'Mere Christianity' was a high powered, aggressive attorney who became a special advisor to a President of the United States.

Chuck Colson, once known as Nixon's hatchet man, became converted while serving his jail sentence. After his release he began a prison ministry where he has preached to hundreds of thousands of inmates and his Prison Ministry has provided assistance and counseling to help ex-convicts to get work and to integrate honestly back into society.

It doesn't matter whether it's the first century or the twenty-first century, Jesus Christ takes people and transforms them.

He can take people who are a danger to society and turn them into a blessing to others.

The Lord can take anyone who is willing and wonderfully convert them.

The dictionary defines conversion as an ABC – a change in attitude, beliefs and character.

I am fully convinced that everyone needs to be converted and to know for certain that is Christ Himself who has converted them.

Of course the nature of the conversion varies very much from person to person.

Khara and I knew a delightful, jovial Bishop in England, the Bishop of Pontefract.

I remember him saying how he'd always rather envied people who had dramatic 'Damascus Road' type experiences that so drastically changed their lives. But he had also come to appreciate his own conversion which he said had been more of a "drip, drip, drip" conversion.

That is often the case for people who may have been lifelong churchgoers, who might never have succumbed to a life of crime or debauchery, but have regardless been changed gradually by the teachings of Christ.

Whether very dramatic or drip - drip - drip, we need to be certain of our own conversion, sure of our own salvation and confident of our Christian calling.

It's not enough just to try to be a good person.

It's not enough just to come to church.

Both are very worthy and important efforts, but it's quite possible to be a good person and go to church without actually being converted.

I've met several clergymen who've told me that they were not fully converted until several years after they had been serving in the ordained ministry. In one case it was not until he'd been in the ministry for thirty years.

And then to make matters more difficult for him it was his wife who got converted first.

She drove him round the bend for three months with her newfound enthusiasm before he too committed his heart to the Lord in a way he had never done.

But Church, when it strives to be faithful to God, is a dangerous place to be.

Dangerous for our self-serving nature, that is.

The gospel was not designed to make us feel better about ourselves.

The gospel is a divinely charged lightning rod for personal transformation.

So it is vitally important that we ask ourselves:

‘Am I certain that I am converted?’

Am I sure of my salvation?’

Because if we're not sure, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself can and will bless us with the extraordinary gift of conversion, if we approach Him sincerely and humbly in prayer.

To be converted means a real change of heart, and a real change of will.

Conversion can transform a person from being timid and fearful, into being confident;

From not having enough love, to having more than enough to spare;

From being self-absorbed into being someone who knows that their life really does make a difference to others.

Conversion can eliminate any negative trait of character and replace it with a positive one.

As St. Paul says:

“If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation.
The old has gone and the new has come.”

Speaking for myself, although I was brought up in a Christian family and attended a Church of England school, I did not really know the love and power of God until I was twenty-nine.

And I look back at that year as being the most important turning point of my life.

It changed me from being a restless person who was always looking everywhere for meaning and satisfaction, into being a focused person leading a life with a strong sense of purpose.

In the end we all learn, hopefully, that apart from our connection with God, nothing else in life will last. We might value many other things, but they all fade into insignificance compared to just one insistent, all powerful idea, – Eternity.

To be converted means to redefine our priorities and put God back where He should be - in first place. No-one is as passionate about people being surely and soundly converted as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

He has loved each one of us from before we were born through the day we die.

He has loved us through His own death on the Cross and through rising from the dead.

Risen and alive for ever, He waits patiently, not coercing us to do anything against our will, but calling us to align our will with His, in love.