

January 25, 2022

The Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle, Feast

It can, and has been, argued that St. Paul did more to spread the belief in the risen Christ than any other single person. After his zealous persecution of what was first called “the Way” as a young Pharisee known as Saul, he spent the rest of his life, likely about 30 years, even more zealously preaching the message of Christian salvation to all people, even and especially the Gentiles he encountered throughout the known world in his four missionary journeys, counting his final one to Rome where he would be martyred.

Paul was the earliest Christian writer, penning the First Letter to the Thessalonians likely less than 20 years after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. He was the first to develop a specific vocabulary for this new religion by ascribing Christian meaning to words such as *apostle*, *gospel*, *charism* and *ministry*. Perhaps that is why he is the only person who has a feast day dedicated to his conversion. Indeed, that event is detailed three times in the Book of Acts, one of them today’s first reading, and referenced various times in Paul’s epistles. It is certainly a compelling story, even if the details diverge in its different retellings.

For example, earlier in Chapter 9 of Acts of the Apostles it was recounted that those with Saul did not see the light from the sky that flashed all around but heard the voice. Yet we read in Chapter 22 that Saul’s companions saw the great light that suddenly shone around him but did not hear the voice. The variations may be due to the different sources used by Luke, the author of Acts, as well as the different emphasis he wanted to place on certain elements of the story, as in highlighting in today’s version that Paul was directly commissioned by the risen Christ no less than the Eleven to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection.

However, in all three, Jesus clearly and consistently stated to the one who was persecuting the people of the Way that he was in fact persecuting Jesus himself. Those words profoundly and permanently changed Paul’s life. He did not hear the words Jesus told the Eleven to “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.” Still that is exactly what he did. Paul’s life gave evidence of the signs that Jesus promised would accompany those who believe. But most importantly, he forever saw every person as someone worthy of receiving the gift of salvation, as someone whom in deriding or debasing he would be deriding or debasing Jesus himself. Without argument, that is the Way for us all. *Acts 22:3-16 (alt. Acts 9:1-22); Ps 117: 1c, 2; Mk 16:15-18*

*Cathy Lentz, Director of Adult Faith Formation
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church*