



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, April 29, 2001
The Third Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Acts 9:1-19a
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CHRIST'S "JOKE" ON SAUL

And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus; and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest...

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It is a tradition from the time of the early Church to read from Saint Luke's Book of the Acts of the Apostles throughout Eastertide, for the reason that the Book of Acts demonstrates the power of Jesus' Resurrection through the transformation of his disciples into the bold witnesses of the Gospel.

The conversion of the Pharisee and persecutor of the Church, Saul of Tarsus, into Saint Paul the Apostle, may well be the most important event in Church history following the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. Saint Luke recounts the story we just heard no less than three times. As a traveling companion of Paul's, Luke was in a good position to know the story and its importance.

Saint Paul himself refers to his conversion several times in his letters. In each of these references, Paul makes it clear that his conversion, wonderful as it was, is important, not because it was something interesting about Paul, but because *his conversion was the result of his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus*.

In that encounter, Paul learned, first of all, that by being a persecutor of the early Christian disciples, he was in fact *a persecutor of Jesus himself*. Far from being a dead and fraudulent rabbi, as Saul thought, Jesus was alive, presiding over the affairs of his followers and *living in and through them* as well. So it was that when Paul asked who it was who knocked him down and was speaking to him, he learned that Jesus identified himself personally with his faithful followers. "*I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.*"

Paul's life thereafter was no longer about Paul, but about Christ who had stopped and redirected him. Writing years later from prison in Rome to the Church he founded at Philippi in

Greece, Paul uses strong and moving language as he reflects on the meaning of his life: “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung [!], that I may win Christ, and be found in him.” (Phil 3:8ff)

Saint Paul most certainly attained that cherished goal, and he left behind him a wonderful legacy, including a paper trail that includes more than half of the inspired writings of the New Testament. It is simply not possible to have a proper understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ without full recourse to this great Apostle.

I want to gather up Paul’s apostleship under two great headings so that you can remember them and so that you can realize how very directly Jesus Christ touches us through the Apostle.

The first: Through the agency of Paul, our Lord Jesus Christ became known as not only the Messiah of the Jews but also the Lord and God of the Gentiles, the non-Jews. In other words, Jesus through Paul made his Lordship international and global, and the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church became a flesh and blood reality. It was Paul who referred to the Catholic Church as the “Bride” or “Body” of Christ – the extension of Christ’s incarnation through the whole world.

The second: Through the agency of Paul the Gospel of the *free grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ was unfolded with bright clarity, so much so that Paul is rightly called “the apostle of the heart set free.” It was Paul who explained to the world that the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ means unconditional forgiveness, justification, and a continual fresh start for us sinners. It was Paul who defined life, once we begin to accept this grace, as a matter simply of living thankfully, or in his words, “walking by the Spirit.”

There is more than a little of the divine humor in all this. In today’s reading from Acts, when Jesus told the frightened Ananias to baptize Saul of Tarsus, and Ananias remonstrated with the Lord, Jesus let him in on a wonderful joke. The rigid Pharisee of Pharisees would promote the Good News of amazing grace, and take it to those ignorant, unwashed pagans. The joke is, Saul of Tarsus was just the one to do it.

And Saint Paul got the joke! He enjoyed it himself. By any standard, Paul was an intellectual of the first rank. Yet after engaging the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens, he came to a profound and liberating conclusion, which he shared with the Church in Corinth (a difficult bunch in their own right):

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (I Cor 1:20ff)

So let me recapitulate. First, through Paul, Jesus began to realize his holy Catholic Church, his “Bride” or “Body” in the persons and the community of his disciples. That great mystery is present here today and includes us. We are taught and fed by the same Word and Sacraments that teaches and feeds the Church always and everywhere.

Second, through Paul, Jesus kept his Good News of grace and mercy free of compromise and corruption. Thus the clear, straightforward word of the cross comes directly through the Apostle to all of us, high and low, rich and poor, sophisticated and simple. We are brought into the

Body of Christ by this life-giving grace, signed, sealed and delivered in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

Dearly beloved, I want to leave you with just one thing to think about and to do. Purify and reform your own faith by clearing away all the secondary stuff, or as Paul would say, the “dung.” What matters is the cross of Jesus. Because Jesus lives, his cross is a living, life-giving reality. When we enter into this reality we ourselves become part of Christ’s Resurrection, like the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles. Clarify your vision of the cross of the risen Lord at the heart of your faith. Take hold of that vision. Cling to the cross. It is the one thing that will see you through everything, right to (and through) the End. To paraphrase the Apostle, Let us glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; by him we are saved and made free.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.