

The conversion of St. Paul is celebrated on the 25th January. Today we are marking this Sunday as a 'Thanksgiving for Paul's wonderful conversion.' When we look at the life of Paul we see a man who was zealous Jew and someone who was well learned under Gamaliel as well as one who was persecuting the Christians. He truly believed that the Christians were making a huge mistake about Jesus and were misleading people. He was very keen to eliminate all of them and therefore was on a mission to put them into prison and to death. On one occasion when he had taken permission from the Sanhedrin he was heading towards Damascus to persecute the Christians and to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem. His life was turned around completely when he had a direct encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. The encounter led to a complete transformation of Saul to Paul as he went on to preach the gospel and write almost half of the New Testament. We look at Paul's life as a zealous Jew, his encounter with the risen Christ and his life as an Apostle.

Paul was originally Saul a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia. Tarsus is a city in Turkey and it was an important stop for traders, a focal point of many civilizations including the ancient Romans. When Tarsus was capital of the province of Cilicia, it was also a great university city of the Roman world known for its intellectual distinction and material wealth. Paul was trained by Gamaliel who was the leader of the school of Hillel. So, in many ways Paul was a 'Hebrew of the Hebrews'.

Paul was also very familiar with the law of the Jews which was known as the Torah or the Pentateuch. He persecuted the followers of Christ and described them as followers of 'The Way'. He admitted to his past that the zeal for the Jewish faith made him see Christians as traitors and therefore put them to death or in prison. Saul was somebody who was zealous for something that he was convinced about. In his misguided zeal he was going around arresting the Christians. Sometimes we too can be like Saul with our misguided zeal that we do not see God in action and we carry on with our own traditions and beliefs and impose it on others.

Paul's encounter with the risen Christ changed his life inside out. One day he was heading towards Damascus which was located in the Roman province of Syria. Many Jews lived there as well as Christians. Saul was keen to bring in the Christians from Damascus and to make them face trial in Jerusalem. As he was on the way he was blinded by a flashing light and he fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?" Saul asks him, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting" he replied. While Saul was actually persecuting the Christians, Jesus tells him that Saul was persecuting him. When the followers of Christ are persecuted, Christ himself feels the pain. Saul is then taken to the house of Ananias who prays over him and tells him that God had chosen him for his mission. The encounter with Jesus radically altered the life of Paul. He was transformed into an Apostle of Christ and was baptised.

Ananias and others were afraid to engage with Saul because he was one who had persecuted the Christians. However, God revealed to Ananias that he was going to use Saul as his chosen instrument. When Ananias meets Saul he says 'the God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.' Saul was chosen by God to fulfil his purpose. He was to discern God's will for his life with this encounter. This is what happens to Saul's life after this divine encounter. He goes around telling everybody of how he had met with the risen Christ. His sins had been forgiven and he was now cleansed of all his past and was given a new beginning. An encounter with Christ can alter our lives radically. Saul became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Through his ministry many were saved; many were encouraged and many were drawn into God's Kingdom.

We too are called to have this encounter with Jesus. When we do our lives will be transformed radically. Jesus will give us purpose and direction for our lives. When we live our lives for the kingdom and lose it for the kingdom we will indeed gain eternal life. No amount of sacrifice is too much for God's kingdom. May we learn from Paul's example and have an encounter with Jesus, allow our lives to be radically transformed and use our zeal for God's