

CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL 2015

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

FATHER JOHN ALTBERG

ACTS 9.1



IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU SAW THE LIGHT... THIS OFT-APPLIED ADMONITION MAKES SAINT PAUL ONE OF THE MOST WIDELY CITED ALLUSIONS IN WESTERN THOUGHT. IF YOU AND I SHARE ELEMENTS OF 'COUNSEL RECEIVED', THAT CLARION CALL FOR BEHAVIORAL CONVERSION PROBABLY MARKED AT LEAST ONE MOMENT IN OUR LIVES...!

Today's Sermon Hymn sets the stage...SEEING THE LIGHT on the way to Damascus 20 centuries ago had high impact then and continues to this day!

SEEING THE LIGHT...its origin comes often as a shock to those who know St. Paul as the one after whom lots of churches are named, wrote a lot of letters which sometimes make us squirm and children wish their parents had never read. Those who find St Paul a little threatening to their perspective...well, they usually don't want to talk about it.

Who was Paul...where did he come from? We know nothing of his family but we know he was a tentmaker from Tarsus. We know he was educated and studied to be a rabbi from about the age of fourteen.

The lesson for today's Epistle places him on the road to Damascus. Paul hated Christians and was a willing agent who provided arrest warrants for those who had embraced the message of Jesus. Suddenly Jesus appeared to him as a blinding light and said, "Paul, why are you doing this to me." Saul (Paul) had SEEN THE LIGHT...what light...? The TRUE LIGHT in the Gospel of Saint John...Paul was knocked to the ground, blinded.

At that moment commenced the most profound conversion in Christendom...his sight restored, Paul stayed on teaching in the synagogue in Damascus. When he returned to Jerusalem the disciples of Jesus found his story so unbelievable that they shunned him as a crackpot...ultimately he left town. We know little about the intervening years except that he spent time preaching in the Jordan valley, Syria and Cilicia without any notable effect other than angering the Pharisaic Jews...those obsessed with obeying the Law as the sole means to redeeming their lives.

Everything else he did for several years is speculative...logic suggests he went back to making tents, his original business.

Times turned tense as the Apostles struggled to establish Christianity in Jerusalem... ultimately they said "remember Saul from Tarsus, the one who came back from Damascus with the wild story about seeing Jesus...maybe he COULD help." Barnabas was dispatched to find him. Journeying to Tarsus, Barnabas persuaded him to come and help. Paul attended a meeting in Jerusalem...it rekindled his ministry. He became the Church's role model missionary making three journeys all over the Middle East to establish Christianity in the Gentile world. His last journey was to Rome...his desire to be there definitively marks the opening of the Epistle to the Romans. Rome was the center of civilization...Paul wanted to be in the center of influence. Paul was martyred in Rome about 64AD during the Nero persecutions.

For similar reasons I spent much of my life fascinated with going to Rome to learn more about what went on in antiquity and through the centuries. I have been twice...most memorable was a pilgrimage (my oldest son's birthday) to the Church of St. Paul Outside the Walls. There at the tomb of St. Paul I gave thanks for the life of the saint who has been such a great influence in my finally learning something about SEEING THE LIGHT.

One of the things I vividly recall from seminary days is that any major reform and return to orthodoxy throughout the history of Catholic Christendom has usually begun with the re-discovery of St. Paul. I claim no particular scholarship or great intellectual power in repeating that statement but I can tell you that you a critical reading of and about St. Paul will only reinforce why we are here today.

We give thanks for the life and work of St Paul...for his personal epiphany at the appearance of Jesus...for all who have helped us learn about Saint Paul and the TRUE LIGHT that changed his life...and ours!

