

CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL 2016

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...!

The Sermon Hymn just set 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 numerous churches are named, wrote lots of letters which sometimes make us squirm and children wish their parents had never read. To those who find St Paul a little threatening to their perspective they usually don't want to talk about it.

Who was he...where did he come from? We know nothing of his family – only that he came from Tarsus and made tents. Bishop McClean is heard to say, *“Pay attention to the tentmaker.”* We know he was educated...from about age fourteen he went to rabbi school.

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 followers of Jesus. Suddenly Jesus, like all the stadium lights going on at once, a blinding light said, “Paul, what are you doing - why.” 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 called him a crackpot...ultimately left just 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...self obsessively obeying The Law on their own terms as the sole means of redemption.

Everything else he did for several years is speculative...logic suggests he went back to *Tents of Tarsus*, his original firm.

Times turned tense as the Apostles struggled to establish Christianity in Jerusalem... ultimately they said “remember Saul, that guy from Tarsus, who came back from Damascus with the wild story about seeing Jesus...we're desperate - maybe he COULD help.” Barnabas was dispatched to find him. Off to Tarsus... Barnabas somehow persuaded Paul to give it another try. Paul went to a meeting in Jerusalem...it rekindled his ministry. He became the Church's missionary role model - 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 exploring Rome to learn more about what antiquity and through the centuries. I have been there twice...most memorable was a pilgrimage (on 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 profound influence in my – albeit often dimly, SEEING THE LIGHT.

Among vivid perspectives from seminary days is any major reform and return to orthodoxy throughout the history of Christendom usually begins with the re-discovery of St. Paul. I claim no scholarship or intellectual insight in repeating that statement but I do assure that 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!

