

Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:1-6

Paul the apostle is undoubtedly one of the leading characters of the new Testament - second only to Jesus of Nazareth. I remember as a child looking at atlases showing Paul's missionary journeys round the Mediterranean Sea - lines drawn like immense boa constrictors wrapping themselves around Greece, Turkey, Italy and Malta. His conversion on the road to Damascus is one of the most memorable stories of the new Testament. He may have written up to half the contents of the new Testament but the content is not always to our liking: his views on women sometimes seem unnecessarily conservative and in the words of St Peter, 'his letters contain some things that are hard to understand. (2 Peter 3:14)

So the reality is that many people are rather ambivalent about Paul the Apostle: they may respect him but they're not sure that they like him. So I would like to say something this morning about why Paul matters.

Let me give you three reasons:

- first he loved God and he loved Jesus;
- second he made the good news available to the whole world in a language that was widely understood;
- third he was a brilliant thinker.

His love for God has to be the starting point. We know he loved God because of what he was willing to endure. In the first place he was willing to endure ridicule and humiliation. We heard in today's reading that he had travelled to Damascus to arrest Christians and take them back to Jerusalem to be tried and punished. And he was passionate about this mission. It follows that he would not have found it hard to imagine the response amongst the scribes and pharisees in Jerusalem when he returned not with prisoners but with the admission that he had become one of them. He would have been acknowledging that his former passion for persecuting Christians had been utterly misguided, utterly wasted. And what is more he would have to tell all those wise old men at whose feet he

had sat that he now disregarded their opinions utterly. He would have been cutting himself off from all those social contacts that had sustained his adult life. It is hard for us to imagine such a thing.

In fact, Paul faced difficulties immediately. A Christian called Ananias received a vision from the Lord in which he was asked to seek Paul out and pray with him. Ananias's reply was pretty robust:

Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and he has authority from the chief priest to bind all who invoke your name. (Acts 9:13)

I think that is a 'no'. Fortunately the Lord persisted with Ananias and Ananias was a faithful and a brave Christian. So Paul goes on to Damascus, and preaches the gospel that Jesus is the Son of God: but all his hearers can think about is that this was the man who was sent to persecute them. In turn, Paul is the subject of persecution, as those who had been his allies plot to kill him and he has to escape in the dead of night, lowered over the city walls of Damascus in a basket. (Acts 9:25)

He then goes to Jerusalem to meet his new fellow Christians but they are afraid of him. Just as Ananias had stepped forward in Damascus so Barnabas steps forward in Jerusalem and extends the hand of friendship. But now the Greek speaking Christians Jews have it in for him and so Paul flees from Jerusalem to Caesarea. (Acts 9:26-30) Life as a Christian is very difficult for Paul but he never turns back.

In fact he never stops moving. He makes three great journeys around the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, building new churches and then moving on. His letters, which make up a large part of the New Testament, exist because Paul wrote back to those churches once he had moved on, encouraging, praising, and, where necessary rebuking. It is clear from the way he writes that he is filled with love for those to whom he writes. Hear how he begins his letter to the Philippians, written from prison:

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you...

I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more. (Phil 1:3-9)

Sometimes his love shows itself in anger as when he writes to the church in Galatia, where the Christians have become legalistic, bitter and backbiting:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited and crucified!
(Gal 3:1)

He is angry with them because he loves them.

The second important thing we need to know about Paul is that he made the Good News of Jesus Christ widely available. The earliest parts of the New Testament are not the gospels but some of the letters of St Paul. For example, the description of how Jesus took bread and wine at the Last Supper comes not from any of the gospels but from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. (11:23 ff) This is the passage we hear every Sunday in the Eucharistic Prayer. But it is not just that Paul wrote it down, but that he wrote it down in Greek. Jesus and his disciples and spoke in Aramaic, the language used by a small number of people in a very limited geographical area. The language of public life, the language used by educated people, the language used over the whole of the eastern part of the Roman Empire was Greek. Paul wrote in Greek which meant that his writings were accessible to huge numbers of people. In our own terms it's the difference between writing in Gaelic and English.

But the third important characteristic of Paul is the content of what he wrote. We might identify five key parts of his teaching. Three of them are about Jesus:

- Jesus has been raised from the dead
- Jesus is Lord
- Jesus is the Messiah

One of them is about our relationship with God:

- It is all God's doing – grace

One of them is about our relationship with other people:

- Those who in Christ have to behave differently

The content of Paul's teaching is exactly the same as the content of Jesus is teaching. For example Paul tells the Corinthians that no matter what sacrifices they make, even if they give up their own lives, if it is motivated by anything other than love it is a waste of time. (1 Cor 13:3)

When Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment, he replies:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22: 37-40)

But the method of teaching is different and this may be what people sometimes find difficult about Paul. Jesus teaches through his actions, above all by dying on the cross. But he also teaches through stories, parables, where the meaning is open, where we draw our own conclusions. Paul's method is often different as he lays the law down in very literal ways.

But the reality is that Paul is engaged in a different task. Jesus operates as a rabbi within the Jewish community and although he often criticises the established leaders he makes no attempt to set up any up any kind of alternative faith community. He is provoking the imagination and the thought processes of individual faithful Jewish people. In the years immediately following the resurrection it was not entirely clear whether the Christian faith would be a sect within Judaism or a new religion. But by the time Paul began his ministry it was very clearly a new faith which was going to include many people with no Jewish background at all. So Paul's task was a very practical one: to build up and establish new communities

which would function effectively. His ministry of building church congregations was very different from that of Jesus.

But Paul's life ended of course in the same way as that of Jesus. Paul was executed in Rome, the capital city of the Empire.

Unlike the case of Jesus, we have no account of his final words. But we do have words that he wrote from prison as he anticipated his own execution:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:8 ff)

It is quite an extraordinary expression of faith. Over the last two weeks I have invited you to consider where you are on the journey of faith from security to sacrifice there can be no doubt that Paul had reached that final step. Perhaps not many do. I wonder where you are.

N Clews
5th May 2019