

## The Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

Cathedral Day; 1/27/08

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*Gracious God,*

*Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.*

*Amen.*

I've been speaking at our Inquirers Class for the past two weeks. As is often the case when teaching, I said many things in God's name. A reasonable question could have arisen in the Q&A following the talks: "How do you know?"

How do we know? How do we know what God thinks and feels, what God longs for, what God intends? Other religions are reluctant to speak in absolute terms: "The Tao that can be spoken is not the true Tao." "The one who says doesn't know, the one who knows doesn't say." The Buddha was hesitant to opine about matters beyond his enlightened comprehension; Hindus posit an ultimate deity beyond all human understanding.

So why don't we humbly join their ranks and keep our big traps shut when it comes matters divine? Well, only because we can't. Because to do so would be unfaithful. Because we cling to a Living Word that requires utterance. Because we hold that God has spoken directly to us in and through the creation, the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, the Scriptures, the mission and ministry of the church, the Holy Spirit and through many other modes, means, methods and mechanisms. We believe the inscrutable, unknowable God chose to be known and loved by us and by all; to refrain from shouting out good news is to sin.

Revelation is the foundation of our religion – we receive the faith as a gift of love from the One who creates, redeems and inspires. I mention all this now because it helps us better understand and appreciate our patron saint. Today we're celebrating the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. Paul insisted on apostolic authority and, frankly, had to persistently make the case on his own behalf. An apostle was someone who walked and talked with Jesus, who trod the dusty trails from Galilee to Jerusalem with the Nazarene, who sated himself with fish and bread at the feeding of the five thousand, who saw a man walk on water and a dead child raised and a leper cleansed and a demon cast out, who sat at the foot of the master on the mount to hear pure wisdom spoken.

Paul, untimely born, was not an apostle in this sense. He wasn't there with the others, the originals – with Peter, James, John, Nathaniel, Andrew, Judas, et al. His letters don't say much about the actual life and ministry of Jesus, not much about the birth or the healings or the teaching. We don't know what he knew about all that – his epistles were penned several decades before the gospels took final shape; he may have been unaware of the details.

So how does Paul claim apostolic status? Revelation. "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

*There I am, minding my own business, hunting down his followers, when all of a sudden I see him. Or, better yet, he sees me. Knocks me off my horse, pins me down, blinds me, scolds me, lifts me up, and sends me on my way – my new way. I didn't know what hit me – it took years to figure it out. I hid, ran away. But then, after three years, I finally went down to Jerusalem to talk with Peter. Stayed two weeks at his house - ran into James, the Lord's brother. Then I set out again and I've been on the move ever since, just telling the story. But I saw him, I saw him.*

That's Paul's claim – and it's ours too. His reality is our reality – we were not there at the beginning either but we hold and proclaim the faith nonetheless; we do so based on the testimony of the saints and our direct experience of Christ's presence in our life. He comes to us, too, to claim us and redirect us for his purposes.

And that's part of what we celebrate on our feast day – all the people who allowed themselves to be so claimed and directed. We celebrate the august clergy who led this congregation in years past – people like Harold Robinson, Jack Sanford, Jim Carroll, John Chane. We celebrate visionary lay-people who established ministries like Saint Paul's Senior Homes, at first a haven for lonely widows and now a \$20,000,000 a year housing and health care corporation. Or the Uptown Interfaith Service Center, a haven to the urban homeless. Or, most recently, Dorcas House, a haven for the children of incarcerated parents in Tijuana.

But most of all we celebrate those tens of thousands who, over the course of a century and more, each contributed in their own unique way, a way that was almost surely overlooked and under-appreciated at the time but made all the difference in the end. The true saints are not always those who get in on the ground floor or who get out in front of the parade – the true saints are often those who follow up and ensure the robust proclamation of the Living Word. They do this most frequently through acts of love and service rather than through eloquence. Wisdom takes many forms and revelation requires multiple vehicles.

I'm reminded now of the story of the renowned preacher who traveled from pulpit to pulpit with his loyal servant by his side. Every time the famous orator stood to speak to God's people his servant knelt below in prayer. After decades together the servant died and the people of God immediately noticed a difference in the preacher's proclamation – it was flat, trite, tiresome. It slowly dawned on them that the power they'd felt all those years derived not from the great man's wisdom or fluency but from the humble man's prayers.

That story helps us better understand the nature of Christian spirituality. Prayer is the beating heart of our faith but that doesn't let us off the hook – prayer doesn't preclude proclamation but, rather, supports it. We're still called to shout out the good news. As I was driving to church last Sunday morning I came to a rather startling and liberating realization: Faithful Christians are windbags. I mean that in at least two ways. First, we can't stop talking, especially about God in Christ. We go on and on, spewing out thoughts and theories that may be helpful or scandalous, rooted in tradition or idiosyncratic, clear or obscure. That's just how we are – not at a loss for words, notions, or opinions. But we are also windbags in another sense; windbags fan flames – a spark, perhaps, that gets a shot of air and leaps into fire. We do that for each other when we speak God's truth in love. We ignite the flame of the Spirit that may have been hidden and smoldering for years, decades. In these moments we are to one another what the great preacher's servant was to him; prayerful agents of our neighbor's transformation.

And when we're unsure about how to do this, when we don't know how to start, we cling to the promise of Christ offered in today's gospel: "Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

And that, if I've got Paul right, is what our patron saint was essentially about. He too was filled to overflowing with words about God and opinions about how God's people ought to be. Some of these notions were indeed apostolic – authoritative, revelatory – and some slightly less so. Beneath all these words were deep trust and intense love. Through trust and love – and through God's Word breathed through him – Paul lifted millions into heaven. We honor his witness today and, following his good example, pledge to uphold one another as zealously. Amen.