

don't know if you have ever had a Damascus road conversion,
Like Paul here

Perhaps you once decide that you would also drink tea
And then switched your allegiance to coffee

Did you once decide that you hated classical music
And then one day decided you like it

Did you hate all forms of Reality TV
And one day suddenly found yourself addicted to Love Island

Or perhaps you might remember a shocking experience that happened to many Scottish households in the UK in the 1970s
Where previously the main meal in the middle of the day was called dinner
And the lighter meal in the evening be called tea
Only for the world to be turned upside down
And the middle of the day meal would be called something called lunch
And the meal at the end of the day, that would be called dinner.

I joke about these things,
Because it shows how resistant we are
To even the most minor of upsets and changes.

These conversions are as nothing
Compared to the change undergone by Saul (as he was) in this story.

We learn from Philippians
That Saul was a grade A student amongst the Rabbis
He was the bright young then
The one to look out for
He was the one with the best answers
The smartest responses in Rabbi classes
And he studied with the greatest Rabbi of his day, Rabbi Gamaliel.

As he progressed as a young man
He was distressed and shocked to discover of a new group of Jews
Who were making the most outrageous claims
About a Rabbi from Nazareth,
A man named Jesus
Who had been killed by a conspiracy between the Jewish Council and the Romans
For allowing the story to spread that not only was a he a Rabbi
But that he was also God.

And because he performed miracles that were proving so popular
That he was becoming a threat to the Establishment.

It seemed that everything had been fixed when the man had been put to death
On a cross - that most shameful of executions
For Saul knew that anyone killed on a cross, a wooden cross
Must be curse,
Because the scriptures said that anyone put to death on a tree was cursed by God.

But three days after this man's death
His followers were claiming that he had been raised from the dead.

This was something that Saul hated
He hated it because it went against the scriptures - how could a tree killed man be
anything other than a curse

He hated it because it went against the Establishment which so far had proclaimed that
he Saul was its champion

He hated it because it was new, and revolutionary

He hated it because it's followers were not educated men - what was the point of an
education like his, if any fisherman from Galilee who could turn up start outsmarting Saul
with his expensive education

He hate it because the whole world that made him feel secure
Would be in great danger if people started believing in this Jesus.

Saul hated everything about this new religion
And the hate burnt so strongly within him that he resolved to be the man who would
destroy it.

He first of all witnessed the death of a Jesus follower called Stephen
And not satisfied with watching others do the work of the stoning
He started doing it himself
And not satisfied with doing it in Jerusalem
He knew he need to stop this movement growing like a collection of weeds
So he went to Damascus in Syria to put the believers in jail.

The Christians in Damascus had heard that this great firebrand was coming
And they were terrified.

And that is when it happened
On the road to Damascus

A light from heaven flashed
He fell down, he heard a voice
"Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you Lord?" Said Saul

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" said Jesus.

So Saul, blinded is taken to the city,
And he did not eat or drink for three days.

Something utterly shaking and utterly shocking has happened to Saul
This is not a minor skirmish with change
This is change that is blinded him,
Destroyed his capacity to see the world
As if all the things that he thought he could see so clearly
Can no longer be seen.

And for three days he does nothing but wait
Almost has if the change has to have a chance to act on him
That if this change is going to be permanent
Then it has to be given the chance to go deep into him.

And then God sends him a friend
Because often we need friends when we are in the process of change
This friend is called Ananias.

He is terrified of Saul, but he does as he is told
He is given the address to go to to look after him
Straight Street
The street name almost feels like a joke
As if Saul is being straightened out.

Ananias is told that Saul is going to suffer
This change is going to cost him
And this peculiar appetite for travel
Which took him to Damascus in the first place
Is going to be put to good use
And he is going to preach the gospel all over the world.

And then in a very gentle scene,
Ananias, whom Saul would have tried to kill
Had Saul's original plans had gone ahead
Ananias, is the one who prays for Saul
And Saul is healed.

What does this story tell us?
How does it speak to us?

One of the first things it tells us
Is that fundamentally the Christian faith is about the insight
That Jesus is alive and with us.

Certainly we will doubt this from time to time
In fact, we may have major doubts
But still that is the claim at the heart of our faith
The claim that Jesus came back from the dead
He is risen.

There will be many questions to be addressed
Questions about the nature of the Trinity
Or questions about the nature of the Bible
Or the correct way to run the Church
Or the best answer to the great ethical questions that face Christians in every age
And there will discussions and disagreements about these things
But fundamentally it comes down to this

How do we live in a world
In which Jesus is alive.

Once we have dealt with that one,
Then all the other questions can be dealt with.
But first of all we have to come to terms with a world in which Jesus is alive
That God is with us
That God has come to us
And that God in Jesus Christ will not let us go
And death is not the end of for us...

That is the first thing.

Secondly

The second thing is that Saul's conversion is going to take him out.
It seems to me that conversions never take us in
They always seem to send us out
The always seem to give us a bigger God than the one we started with
Conversions mean that we don't build walls to keep outsiders out
It means we lengthen our table
To welcome more people in.

Conversions always seem to create fewer outsiders, and the insiders hate it.

Saul is going to suffer for his new faith,
Which expands out
Precisely at the hands of people like Saul.

He is going to have his credentials questioned
He is going to lose his status
His is going to be punished and beaten in the way that he wanted to punish others

This new faith not only changes Saul's view of God
It also means that he is going to change his view of others.

Saul is going to have let go of religion which confines
Which says that you have to be like us to be a friend of God,
And instead you are going to discover that God undermines all our attempts to hold God
in, and is going to use us as the agents of God going out.

So that is the second thing
You are converted to be the messenger of God
To Bring God to people to who thought that God had little to do with them
And if that means we in the Church have to be open to that
Then we we too in the Church have to be prepared to change.

Finally...

And finally we see that God when he converts us takes the raw materials of who we are
And he takes the basic character we have and he points it in a new direction
So all of Paul's learning
And all of Paul's willingness to travel
And all of Paul's passion
All of these things are going to be used to point towards Christ

So it is that God takes our basic selves
And personalities
Our temperament
And he points it in a new direction.

And I think that God does this continually
Continually reshapes us
To point us in the right direction.

And for all this story is disturbing
I envy Paul one thing
That when he was wrong
God told him about it

And I hope that for us
For all of us
That where we have got things wrong
That God would tell us
Upset us
And point us in the right direction
So that different people
Will come to know Jesus
The one who is still alive
And calling people like me and you to serve him

AMEN