

St Brandon's, Sermon for 25th January 2026

Conversion of St Paul

Psalm 67, Acts 9:1-22, Matthew 19:27-end

Calling and Change

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I wonder how you reacted to this graphic description of Paul's conversion? It's a very detailed account of a very dramatic event. I always see in my mind's eye the large mural that covers a whole wall at Minsteracres retreat house, perhaps some of you have seen that or other paintings inspired by this story?

The Christian understanding of conversion has its roots in the Old Testament where we find God turning towards his children, sometimes favourably, sometimes unfavourably, but always in pursuit of their salvation. The children – Israel – turn towards God in loyalty, at other times away from God in rebellion.

The Christian understanding thus formed is of 'conversion' as turning to face more fully towards God and away from evil – no coincidence that this features in the words at baptism in readiness to receive the Holy Spirit.

The actual word 'conversion' appears only once in the New Testament, in Acts 15 where it says Paul and Barnabas "*reported the conversion of the Gentiles*". However, the theme of conversion runs throughout the New Testament in the imagery of 'turning', or 'returning' and 'repentance'. Think of the prodigal son 'returning' to the father, in repentance, determined to change his ways and begin anew. Zaccheus the tax collector-come-good, whose 'repentance' prompts Jesus to tell a parable about 'returning'.

It is easier to understand the link between the passage we heard from Matthew and 'conversion' when we hear it in context. What we are *not* hearing, is Jesus talking about the difficulty of serving both God and mammon, of the treasure in heaven, the conversation with the rich young man and subsequent warning to the disciples that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom. The disciples fall for the assumption that riches are a sign of God's favour, so are puzzled by

this last statement and good old Peter blurts, *“Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”*

Its worth noticing, though, that Jesus also cautions the disciples, presumably against complacency, pride or sense of entitlement around his promise saying, *“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”* He goes on to illustrate what he means with the parable of the workers who are hired at different times of the day, and the paymaster chooses to pay those who were called and worked only the last hour the same full pay as those who laboured all day. God’s generosity and sense of entitlement can feel very different to ours.

Conversion can be hard, we may well feel along with the disciples that we want to know the reward. Jesus says the reward will be one hundred-fold for those who leave behind those things that get in the way of following him. When we move on from habits or circumstances that prevent us turning further towards God, and doing what he asks us to do. When we are not living the way we would choose – that is assuming that we all, at the bottom of our hearts, long to live in a way that enables us to serve God in the world and come into a closer relationship with Jesus. The joy that brings, even when suffering is part of the deal is the aspect of reward that we are given in this life, and Jesus points to there being great reward in the life beyond death also.

How can we know what things we need to change or do to follow Christ?
Rosalind Brown says:

“Conversion of life is a daily openness to God’s mercy and grace in our lives and in the world.

Conversion is about on-going, life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ, about walking with God day by day and converting the way we live in the light of that. Conversion will go on affecting everything we do – how we spend our time and our money, how we relate to people, how we engage with politics and national life and, if we are caring for a dependent relative, how we repeat the endless daily delicate tasks involved.

If we want to know where conversion affects us, asking ourselves what is the hardest thing that God could ask us to change can point us in the right direction, but God may yet surprise us from beyond our frame of reference."

Today's bible passages show us that the turning and changing associated with conversion is intrinsically linked with calling.

Paul's 'calling' was so violent that it's more of a 'telling' than a 'calling' – "*get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*" But Paul still had choice, he could have said no and run the other way like Jonah. But Paul chose to obey, he chose the way of the followers of Jesus.

It is an incredible U-turn that Paul is called to make but its not from a standing start. Paul is already an ardent follower of God, he has a strong and informed faith but has unwittingly been rebelling against God by his persecutions of those following Jesus: it was Paul, known then as Saul, who watched and approved of Stephen being stoned to death.

Now Saul/Paul is seeing heavenly visions: a flash of heavenly light and the voice – audible to his fellow travellers – addressing him directly,

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

He must now realise that Stephen's visionary experience that so angered the mob was no delusion; I wonder how Saul is feeling now about Stephen's killing?

Paul-who-was-Saul, the persecutor of Christians, then spent three days in prayer refusing food or drink until the person promised in his prayer-vision might come to lay hands on him and heal his sight. In the same vision given to Ananias, Jesus reveals more: Paul is "*an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel*".

Paul doesn't decide to preach the gospel as a *result* of becoming a Christian, *God* initiates it all by choosing and calling him to become that person. God initiates it by changing Paul from the inside out: spiritually transforming and opening him to see Jesus for who he is. Because God, in the person of Jesus has a plan for Paul's life, if Paul is willing to become a person capable of this momentous service for God.

God also has a plan for Ananias who is already a committed Christian but now is being called to overcome his fears and seek out the infamous Saul: to do a new and demanding task for God. God has a plan for all and each of us, and calls us through the Holy Spirit to hear and live his plan. We are not just called once, but like Ananias, we are called again, and again, to new tasks that deepen and widen our faith. We are called to explore and face the implications of following Christ, the uncomfortable and challenging moments that are required of us if we are to grow. To grow as Christians, to grow closer to God, and to grow into the people he made us to be, doing the work we, uniquely, are able to do with and for him.

God leaves us free to choose. Conversion is always a matter of choice between options, and opting for the way of the Lord. It is the starting point for a change of attitude and lifestyle that is not triggered by us, by any deed or action but by God working in us through the Holy Spirit. It starts with a spiritual transformation within us, and must be worked out by choosing change in who and how we are, and above all, in *whose* we are.

Amen