

The Conversion of Paul (2026)

Well here's a question for you. Would you invite St Paul to dinner at *your* home, after his conversion? Converts can be very loud and demonstrative, can't they? I think of Ann Widemcombe MP when she converted and became a Roman Catholic. We discovered her brother was an evangelical Vicar whom, we assume, was not well-pleased with her crossing the Rubicon. But she rubbed it in somewhat...

Any and every opportunity she had to tell us of her new love for all things Roman and Papal, well, she never stopped! One Catholic priest friend of mine whispered to me cynically, 'Father, we wouldn't mind if you took her back into the Anglican fold!'

Of course it isn't just the divisions and prejudices of different faith allegiances when conversion teases or annoys us. Have you heard a retiree wax forth, who has just taken up golf, for example? It becomes almost an obsession. 'I only played six times last week and my handicap still hasn't changed'!

Or have you heard someone with so much social time on their hands they have become 'experts' on which restaurants you should go to? I only go to 'so and so' for an Italian...I would never go to.....wherever! The Blue Fig in Market Hill?

Converts like their strong opinions to be heard but listening to them 'ad nauseam' can be somewhat challenging. For some reason unknown to me 'The conversion of St Paul' has become the annual occasion to mark the end of the Week of

Prayer for Christian Unity and at a time of year which is generally cold, dark, and miserable. But I digress...

St Paul, the soldier and Jew who persecuted Christians is someone who became, arguably, the greatest 'builder and planter' (to steal Jeremiah's words) of Christian seeds; the very first and most challenging proponent and Master of Christian theology. Gunther Bornkamm wrote this from the University of Heidelberg:

"It suddenly dawned on him who this Jesus really was whom hitherto he regarded as a destroyer of the most sacred foundations of the Jewish faith and whom it had been right to crucify. He realized too, the significance of Jesus' mission and death both for himself and the world. We may be quite sure that this question, suggested by the faith and witness of Jesus' followers, had its effect on him and in him."

Now we're talking. The positive spin here is that God's initiative and plan for Paul was unstoppable. There was no turning back. But if we are to better understand the man, we also have to appreciate his Jewishness and not pretend that what he left behind was *all* negative or bad. When Paul was converted it was not the case of a man without faith finding the way to God, but of one zealous for God, more in earnest than anyone else about his demands and promises. Professor Bornkamm suggests: 'It was a devout man (Paul) whose way God blocked through the Christ who had died a shameful death on the cross, and on whom he made that light shine of which Paul says elsewhere: "for it is the God who said, 'Let

light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor.4:6)'

When perhaps we wrestle with Paul's thinking (and we should) and try to unravel his dramatic 'conversion experience' it is true to say that he didn't refer to it noisily at all; rather he said that the Gospel found Him, so to speak, and he discovered its riches and treasure to be so profound and wonderful, they had to be shared and written down. We owe a huge debt to St Paul and I would happily invite him around to the Rectory. He may have said, 'I would prefer to go to the Salvation Army HQ instead' who knows?

I do think though we have to rid our society of anti-Semitism and on Tuesday's Holocaust Memorial Day we do have to remember and never forget that any kind of genocide is not only sinful but criminal and shameful. And we do have to be converts, all of us, to keep conversation and understanding going between different faiths. The Council of Christians and Jews in our own country is a case in point. It is possible and laudable to show respect each to the other and not least, respect and love for the same God who made each of us and gave us the gift of life in its sanctity and fullness.

Last week, I found myself watching more by accident than design - a 'live', TV debate in the House of Commons on finally agreeing the siting and design of a new Holocaust Memorial at the very heart of London. The debate has been going on for years (even longer than our own PCC's talking

about a toilet in Church) – and **still** no consensus! One senior MP said he wanted a learning centre incorporated into the Memorial, like the one he saw in Washington. Another said the plans underground will make everything too cramped; and another how would they cope with such a lack of parking and difficult accessibility issues? Is it no wonder that Rabbis have written and complained about so much dither and delay?

What, I wonder, would our Christian Rabbi, St Paul, have to say? For him, and for many preachers across generations, it is surely true to say, that it takes boldness to preach the Gospel and, both courage and joy, to let it change us.

Amen.