

## **Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January – Conversion of St Paul**

Acts 9:1-22

Matthew 19:27-end

Certain phrases from speeches by politicians and other well known figures become part of our history. They linger in the collective memory well after the events that spawned them have been long consigned to the past.

MLK's "I have a dream" is perhaps one  
JFK's "ich bin ein Berliner" is another

And Margaret Thatcher's "You turn if you want to; the lady's not for turning" is yet another.

That was part of a speech given to the conservative party conference in 1980. The policies of the Government had seen unemployment rise dramatically in her short time as Prime Minister. There were calls – not least from within her own party – for her policies to be reversed; for a U-turn to be made.

Politicians are famous for not liking U turns. A U turn would mean admitting that a previous course of action was wrong, and we all know that politicians seem to have a morbid fear of uttering those three words "I was wrong".

But does making a U Turn always mean that you were wrong in the past, or could it be that in the present situation the truths and correct actions from the past are simply no longer applicable? Perhaps the world has changed and a new approach is needed. The old has had its day; the new has to be taken on board and adopted.

Today we are celebrating the conversion of St Paul (the exact day of the festival is tomorrow – always the last day in the week of prayer for Christian Unity). Surely his conversion was one of the most significant U Turns in history; certainly in the history of the Christian faith.

Saul (as he was known then) was a Pharisee. He was one of the Jewish religious leaders. He had been brought up in the strict Jewish tradition; he had been to the best schools and studied under the best teachers. Like other Pharisees he felt that the message of Jesus was undermining the Jewish faith and so he joined with the religious establishment in seeking to stifle its spread and strangle this new movement at birth.

And I am sure the story of his conversion is well known to us. He was travelling to Damascus to arrest Christians there when on the road he had a vision of the risen Christ who challenged him with the words "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?". There was a bright light, and he was blinded. He was led to the city, and a Christian there named Ananias bravely answered a call from God to go and pray with him. His sight was restored. He could see again in a physical sense, and in a spiritual sense his eyes were opened for the first time to a new truth about Jesus.

The story that then unfolds is of how the one who persecuted the church becomes its greatest advocate and ambassador. Of how Saul the Pharisee becomes Paul the Apostle who did so much to ensure the Christian faith spread throughout the Middle East and beyond. Of how Paul used his deep and thorough knowledge of the Jewish scriptures and traditions to show how they all pointed towards Jesus as the long promised and anticipated Messiah and Saviour. Of how Paul used his intellect and background to expound and communicate the truths of his new-found faith to both Jews and Gentiles. Of how even today, 2000 years later, we still owe so much to his teaching and writing.

We get the feeling from reading both the Acts of the Apostle and Paul's letters that he used to reflect often on this dramatic U Turn. Twice in Acts we hear him telling the story; in his letters to the Galatians and the Philippians he talks about what happened to him and how he had changed. In Philippians he describes how he looks back to his past and considers all his knowledge and status as a Pharisee as rubbish. And yet he never categorically says about his beliefs "I was wrong".

Is he behaving like a modern day politician, or is there something else going on here?

My guess is that Paul looked back with regret on who he was and what he did, but also recognised that the views he held were sincere and, as far as he could ascertain at the time, were right and true. It took the revelation on the Damascus road to shed new light on how he saw things; to show him that the world had changed because God had acted in a new and powerful way. Jesus had come as the Messiah, and this meant that everything Paul had previously held onto so dearly had to be re-evaluated and reconsidered. This new situation meant that making a U turn was an absolutely necessity for Paul.

The world around us is changing all the time. We have to adapt the way we live to the new situations we find ourselves in. We do it all the time. It simply is not possible to hang on to the past and the old ways of doing things.

We look back with incredulity as to how things used to be. Before mobile phones, before the internet, before we could buy fruit and vegetables the whole year round - in season and out of season; before air travel; before central heating; before microwaves and freezers; before mass vaccinations against dreadful diseases. We adapt to change all the time. In the way we live we are continually making U turns. It's not that the old ways were wrong, just that the world has changed and they are no longer appropriate.

Over these past months we have had to adapt to a very different world. A world where we have not been able to get out and about and meet each other; a world where we have been restricted as to where we can go and what we can do. A world where gathering together as church has not been possible.

We hope and trust that with vaccinations being rolled out across the population the tight restrictions will soon be lifted and that we will once again be able to meet with each other. But the post Covid world will be a different world to the pre Covid world. We can't be

certain as yet exactly how, but what we have been through over this past year has changed the way we live and will change the future. And this will apply to the church as well.

We have got accustomed to speaking to each other over zoom or other digital means; we have got used to worshipping God when we want to using the YouTube videos. And yet we are aware that those without access to the internet have not been able to access much of what we have done – and so we have added worship over the telephone and on the printed page. Because of the dangers of the transmission of the virus we are more wary of being in close proximity with other people – but I wonder - will we ever be comfortable in large crowds again?

And so we might ponder - what will the post Covid church look like in Shirley? Will we pick up again the activities and traditions that were abruptly brought to a halt last March? Will the future be the same as the past? Or will some things be laid to rest – not because they were wrong in themselves, but because they do not fit well in the new world into which we are emerging. What new things that we have learned over these past months will we want to carry forward?

These things are important questions to consider. Over Lent we will be doing just that as a church. I want to encourage you to think about how we might move forwards; how we can be churches that are fit for the new world; how we can best live out and proclaim the Christian faith.

Throughout Lent in Sunday morning sermons and in midweek discussion groups we will be thinking about this new world and how we can best witness to our faith in it. What things should we be carrying forwards? Which things have served their purpose and should, with thanks, be left in the past? What new ways have we yet to learn and adopt? How can we best equipped to face the future?

I encourage you to think about these things and to work through them together. The more input we have, the wiser choices we will make and the better prepared we will be.