

**Thursday 25 January 2024**

# The Conversion of St Paul



**The conversion of St Paul**

William Blake c.1800, (pen and ink, and watercolour on wove paper).

Today's festival celebrates the moment when the anti-Christian bigot, Saul, converted to become the apostle of Christ, Paul. This conversion was a beginning with Saul taking time to become Paul and to understand his call. The Church first celebrated this feast in the sixth century; it became universal in the twelfth century.

**Sermon** © The Revd Dr Paul Monk.

**Liturgy and prayers of intercession** © 2000 The Archbishops' Council.

**Bible readings** © the publishers of the NRSV translation.

The liturgy assumes this service is Eucharistic. The prayers of consecration appear at the end.

To hear the hymns please hover the mouse over each link, press Ctrl and then return.

To see service transcripts from previous weeks, please visit the page,

<http://www.medlockhead.co.uk/resources/index.htm>

## Introduction and welcome

**HYMN 1** [Mine eyes have seen the glory](#) (click on this link to hear the hymn)

## The Welcome

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

**All Amen.**

The Lord be with you

**All And also with you.**

## The Preparation

**All Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul, with all your mind,

and with all your strength.’

And the second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

There is no other commandment greater than these.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

**All Amen. Lord, have mercy.**

We were once dead through the trespasses and sins in which we lived,  
but now we are alive together with Christ.

Through him we have access in one Spirit to the Father,  
to whom we humbly confess our sins.

**All** Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
we have sinned against you  
and against our neighbour  
in thought and word and deed,  
through negligence, through weakness,  
through our own deliberate fault.  
We are truly sorry  
and repent of all our sins.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
who died for us,  
forgive us all that is past  
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life  
to the glory of your name. Amen.

Almighty God,  
who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you,  
pardon and deliver you from all your sins,  
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness,  
and keep you in life eternal;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All** Amen.

## **The Gloria**

**All** Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace to his people on earth.  
Lord God, heavenly King,  
almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.  
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,  
Lord God, Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world:  
have mercy on us;  
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
receive our prayer.

**For you alone are the Holy One,  
you alone are the Lord,  
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.**

### **The collect for the Conversion of St Paul**

Almighty God,  
who caused the light of the gospel  
to shine throughout the world  
through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul:  
grant that we who celebrate his wonderful conversion  
may follow him in bearing witness to your truth;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
**All Amen.**

### **First reading**

A reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah

The word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

*Jeremiah 1:4-10*

This is the Word of the Lord

**All Thanks be to God.**

## Second reading

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, and went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

*Acts 9:1-22*

This is the Word of the Lord

**All Thanks be to God.**

HYMN 2 [To God be the glory](#)[\(click on this link to hear the hymn\)](#)

## Gospel reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew

**All**    **Glory to you O Lord.**

Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'         *Matthew 19:27-30*

This is the Gospel of the Lord

**All**    **Praise to you O Christ.**

## Sermon

To begin with, Saul was no ordinary convert. He had a good background as a Jew from the very highest levels of society; he was a Roman citizen; and he had studied under the very best teachers. He therefore knew he was destined for high office.

We do not know the circumstances by which Saul became the oppressor of the early church—was he authorised and sponsored, from above, by the Jewish 'Establishment', or did he choose for himself? If authorised, then it was a clear sign of public trust that he (rather than someone else) had been chosen to deal with so conspicuous a heresy. And if the latter, then he had both substantial private means but also leisure to act as examining prosecutor, travelling widely with a sizeable retinue; he must also have believed in his cause if he was committing so much of his own money.

Saul was a man of impeccable civic credentials but also a man of faith and was schooled in the religious Law. The story in the Acts of the Apostles is not explicit enough, but Saul's investigation acted like a 'court' trying matters of Jewish belief, in much the same way as we commonly think of the Spanish Inquisition. And, like the Inquisition, Saul had the power of life and death, either given officially or he had taken it upon himself. Again, the Acts of the Apostles depicts a man who believed in his own cause.

Paul was a man capable of extremes. Add to this mix that he could be proud: we know he refused to back down after arguing with John Mark (15:30–35). Similarly, he did not do things by halves, so on at least one occasion he preached through the night (Acts 20:7)! Finally, he must also have been hugely strong, especially when a younger man, because he lists in 2 Corinthians 11:25–30 a long list of the woes he'd undergone for the Gospel. All in all, then, Saul must have been a formidable opponent.

Thankfully, there was one redeeming feature in the character of this dynamo: the letters preserved in the New Testament suggest Saul was a man of passion—he was capable of love and loyalty and was willing to respond to those passions in others. And that is why God chose him.

Saul's character may even remind us of King David who loved the Lord, was a lyrical poet, he comes across as impulsive, but God spoke to him. This was the man who was persecuting the early church from a position of moral superiority. Taken together, then, we now have all the jigsaw pieces to explain a crisis of faith—the Conversion of St Paul—that changed history.

Saul came to loath the new religion of Christianity: it was this anger that energised his actions, spurring him and feeding onward. But he saw the converts dying with extreme courage, unlearned men (and women?) speaking eloquently with arguments that he, Saul, struggled to counter—but how could he if these people were prophets, speaking the words from God?!

We this self-righteous man being bested by common people, who could argue against him, who died bravely and with conviction in their new faith. And his pride could not let him acknowledge any of it. Inwardly, he would have seethed and pretended to himself that he was seeing something else, such as stubbornness. He was, as Acts 26:14 puts it, 'kicking against the goads'. It was like an irresistible force acting against an immovable object, so something had to give. It did.

The occasion occurred while travelling with a retinue toward Damascus. He saw a brilliant light in the sky and heard voices. In context, a strong, deeply-religious, proud man would have assumed God was commissioning him as a prophet—look at the accounts of other prophets being commissioned such as Moses (Exodus 3:1–6), Isaiah (6:1–8), Jeremiah (1:4–9), or Ezekiel (1:1 ff.). Most involved light and all involved voices. *But this celestial voice turned out to be Jesus and accused him of persecution.*

There would have been a sense of shock and shame. The blindness mentioned in Acts is suggestive. But there must have also been an overwhelming sense of

relief as he acknowledged what he's seen previously ('It was of God!') and that he could himself now follow something he had previously desired so strongly. It would have been like the emotional release after capitulating to an intense infatuation. Indeed, he elected for immediate baptism and changed his name: the old man was dead and the new must be seen to have taken his place.

It's now that the story changes gear. It suggests that Saul had a breakdown of sorts. Everything about him changed and—much like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly and involving a painful transition like the stage of a chrysalis: Paul went to Arabia (Galatians 4:24–25) where it's probable that he received what today we would call counselling and tuition from converts living there. All this time, Paul's formidable personality was at work.

Later, as 'Paul' the convert came back, bursting onto the scene with his trademark energy and self-confidence. He was using the same formidable mix of passion and intellect, strength and drive. In consequence, he was creating friends and structures, converts and churches. He also demonstrated the same character flaws, some of which are mentioned above. In short, in some respects he was the same person.

In all these ways, the story of Saul / Paul demonstrates this central truth: the process of 'conversion' starts with repentance which involves the whole of a person's character: we need to repent if we are to end up looking at God in a way we did not before. The word means a complete turning around, a rotation through 180°, but we remain fully human, fully mortal, with the same physical constitution, same history, family, and so on. The principal changes are internal: our soul changes and the drives that define us become God's and are used to build His Kingdom.

To summarise, the story of Saul / Paul, starts with a man working toward a goal using all his mind, soul, heart, and strength, and ends with him directing all those same facets of his personality toward a different end. In a sense, the change is simple enough: he is turning from a false idea of God to serving the real God. In reality, if he genuinely repents, he will also find those facets of personality altered and 'fine-tuned' to God's service, and maybe accentuated.

But the final message is for us. All of us need to work for God with all our mind, soul, heart, and strength. It's wise to be aware of our strength weaknesses, so we do not jeopardise whatever ministries God has given us. But, like Saul / Paul, we will find parts of those ministries are not working for God but for an image of God, or for a caricature, or are working against God. We must therefore live within a continual state of repentance so that our lives are for God and never against Him.



## The Creed

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,  
the source of all being and life,  
the one for whom we exist?

**All We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,  
who took our human nature,  
died for us and rose again?

**All We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
who gives life to the people of God  
and makes Christ known in the world?

**All We believe and trust in him.**

This is the faith of the Church.

**All This is our faith.**

**We believe and trust in one God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**

## Prayers of intercession

Encouraged by our fellowship with all the saints,  
let us make our prayers to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Father, your Son called men and women to leave the past behind  
them and to follow him as his disciples in the way of the cross.  
Look with mercy upon those whom he calls today, marks with the cross  
and makes his disciples within the Church ...  
Lord, have mercy.

**All Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son told his disciples not to be afraid, and at Easter breathed  
on them his gift of peace. Look with mercy upon the world into  
which he sent them out, and give it that peace for which it longs ...  
Lord, have mercy.

**All Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son formed around him a company who were no longer servants but friends, and he called all those who obeyed him his brother and sister and mother. Look with mercy upon our families and our friends and upon the communities in which we share ...  
Lord, have mercy.

**All Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son sent out disciples to preach and to heal the sick. Look with mercy on all those who yearn to hear the good news of salvation, and renew among your people the gifts of healing ...  
Lord, have mercy.

**All Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son promised to those who followed him that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel and would share the banquet of the kingdom. According to your promise, look with mercy on those who have walked with Christ in this life and have now passed through death ...  
Lord, have mercy.

**All Christ, have mercy.**

Almighty God,  
you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,  
with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone:  
so join us together in unity of spirit by their doctrine,  
that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All Amen.**

Merciful Father,

**All accept these prayers  
for the sake of your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen.**

## **The peace**

Let the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

The peace of the Lord be always with you,

**All And also with you.**

**HYMN 3** [Agnus Dei](#)

(please click on this link to hear the hymn)

The liturgy of the Communion Service appears below

## The Dismissal

May Christ who called Paul to his service,  
and to preach the Good News to the world,  
strengthen you to witness to his grace and love.  
And the blessing of God the Almighty:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be with you now and remain with you always.

**All** **Amen.**

**HYMN 4** [Revelation song](#)

(please click on this link to hear the hymn)

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

**All** **In the name of Christ. Amen.**

# The Liturgy of the Sacrament

## Eucharistic Prayer (prayer E)

The Lord be with you

**All and also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**All We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**All It is right to give thanks and praise.**

It is indeed right and good, our duty and our joy,  
at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise,  
holy Father, almighty and eternal God,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
For on this day he called to his service  
the blasphemer and persecutor of your Church.  
Saul, who had resisted your grace,  
became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.  
Because he was faithful and true in his ministry,  
you made him an example of patient service,  
to instruct in the way of eternal life  
all those who heard his preaching and believed your word.  
Now, therefore, he who became your chosen instrument  
for the salvation of the nations  
has made us also eager to proclaim your mercy,  
and sing in union with all the powers of heaven  
the joyful hymn of your praise:

**All Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest.**

We praise and bless you, loving Father,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord;  
and as we obey his command,  
send your Holy Spirit,  
that broken bread and wine outpoured  
may be for us the body and blood of your dear Son.

On the night before he died he had supper with his friends  
and, taking bread, he praised you.  
He broke the bread, gave it to them and said:  
Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you;  
do this in remembrance of me.

When supper was ended he took the cup of wine.  
Again he praised you, gave it to them and said:  
Drink this, all of you;  
this is my blood of the new covenant,  
which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.  
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

So, Father, we remember all that Jesus did,  
in him we plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross.

Bringing before you the bread of life and cup of salvation,  
we proclaim his death and resurrection  
until he comes in glory.

Great is the mystery of faith:

**All Christ has died.**  
**Christ is risen.**  
**Christ will come again.**

Lord of all life,  
help us to work together for that day  
when your kingdom comes  
and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.

Look with favour on your people,  
gather us in your loving arms  
and bring us with St Paul and all the saints  
to feast at your table in heaven.

Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all honour and glory are yours, O loving Father,  
for ever and ever.

**All**     **Amen.**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**All**     **Our Father in heaven,**  
          **hallowed be your name,**  
          **your kingdom come,**  
          **your will be done,**  
          **on earth as in heaven.**  
          **Give us today our daily bread.**  
          **Forgive us our sins**  
          **as we forgive those who sin against us.**  
          **Lead us not into temptation**  
          **but deliver us from evil.**  
          **For the kingdom, the power,**  
          **and the glory are yours**  
          **now and for ever.**  
          **Amen.**

### **Breaking of the Bread**

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

**All**     **Though we are many, we are one body,**  
          **because we all share in one bread.**

**All**     **Lamb of God,**  
          **you take away the sin of the world,**  
          **have mercy on us.**

**Lamb of God,**  
          **you take away the sin of the world,**  
          **have mercy on us.**

**Lamb of God,**  
          **you take away the sin of the world,**  
          **grant us peace.**

Draw near with faith.

Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ

which he gave for you,

and his blood which he shed for you.

Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you,

and feed on him in your hearts

by faith with thanksgiving.

**All**     **We do not presume  
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,  
trusting in our own righteousness,  
but in your manifold and great mercies.  
We are not worthy  
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.  
But you are the same Lord  
whose nature is always to have mercy.  
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,  
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ  
and to drink his blood,  
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body  
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,  
and that we may evermore dwell in him,  
and he in us. Amen.**

Communion is distributed.

### **Prayer after Communion**

Lord God, the source of truth and love,

keep us faithful to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,

united in prayer and the breaking of bread,

and one in joy and simplicity of heart,

in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All**     **Amen**

**All**     **Almighty God,  
we thank you for feeding us  
with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.  
Through him we offer you our souls and bodies  
to be a living sacrifice.  
Send us out in the power of your Spirit  
to live and work  
to your praise and glory. Amen.**