

How To Be Converted

Talk by Rev Martin Wroe *Sunday 5 February 2023*

Every summer from when I was eleven, I used to be converted.

I went with my brothers to a Christian camp on the Gower Peninsula in South Wales.

By day we dived into huge waves on the long beaches of Llangenith and Rhossili and at night we slept in ex-Army tents, drinking ourselves to sleep on bottles of Tizer.

Every morning was the 'gospel meeting', when we sat in a big circle, a Bible passage was read and one of the leaders would explain that repenting of our sins and turning to Jesus was the only way to avoid an eternity in hell.

Friday evening, the last night of the week, was Testimony Night when we all sat round again, sang rousing choruses and then sank into a long awkward silence.

Eventually, someone brave would stand up and give his testimony: 'I became a Christian on Tuesday night at 8.37 when I realised I needed my sins forgiven and I knelt by my bed and asked Jesus into my life.'

That broke the dam: soon everyone was jumping up with short, nervous conversion narratives.

I worked out my script, got to my feet and mumbled the events of my own Damascus Road.

It was such a relief to get it out of the way that I never saw the irony: my first Christian confession was a fabrication.

I made the story up to ensure I wouldn't be the odd one out.

The truth didn't set me free, it was a vivid imagination.

An imaginative tale was what it took for me to start owning a faith of my own – not just taking for granted an edition I'd inherited.

You know that fridge magnet?

'I'VE FOUND JESUS ... HE WAS BEHIND THE SOFA ALL THE TIME!'

The joke is on how people of faith can embellish the nature of their divine encounters - the more dramatic the better.

For this I blame the Apostle Paul, who had the conversion story to top the lot.

Paul had the original Damascus Road conversion. We know this because it actually happened on the Road to Damascus.

The dazzling light, the divine voice, the loss of sight... and the wholesale rejection of his previous life.

It wasn't just a defining moment for Saul but for the birth of a new era in history.

The Damascus Road is the highway between an obscure Jewish cult and a global faith that came to be called Christianity.

Without Saul who became Paul, Jesus might have remained just another leader of an oddball Jewish sect – the kind that Saul, a devout Jew, used to terrorize.

Many Jews saw the emerging Jesus movement as a virus that could wipe out true Judaism.

Saul would go from house to house, rounding up the early Christians, dragging them into prison.

When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death, Paul was looking on.

'I was violently persecuting the church,' he wrote later. 'I was trying to destroy it.'

But on the road to Damascus comes this out of the ordinary experience. Extreme epiphany you could call it, primitive religion that many of us today would find embarrassing.

A dazzling light throws him to the ground, and a voice asks this question: 'Saul, why do you persecute me?'

He's shellshocked for three days, even losing his sight, until Ananias, a follower of Jesus, lays hands on him.

'The scales,' we are told, 'fell from Saul's eyes.'

He will never see anything in the same way again, in time, becoming a leader in the fragile community of Jesus people.

Paul's conversion is so profound - Jesus hater to Jesus follower - that his life unfolds as a series of missionary journeys, setting Christianity on its two-millennial journey around the world.

These days it's rare to hear a public figure making such an about-face.

Think Elon Musk entering a monastery.

Or William Rees Mogg campaigning to join the European Union.

It didn't used to be so unusual.

Augustine, the 4th century scholar, was in a garden in Milan, when he heard an unseen child singing, 'take and read, take and read.'

The nearest book was a letter Paul had written to the church in Rome - we call it The Book of Romans - and Augustine was converted.

St. Francis, in the 13th century, was visiting a disused church building when he heard an icon of Christ ask him to 'Go and repair my house which you see is falling down'.

Francis renounced his family wealth to become a beggar in service of the church.

Recent obituaries for Faye Weldon, who wrote The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, described her surprise late conversion to Christianity after 70 years as an atheist.

'I go to church most Sundays, instead of a therapy group,' she said. 'It's very good to spend half an hour thinking about something beyond oneself...'

The drama of unlikely or sudden conversion can lead the rest of us to think they are the norm.

But most of us rarely experience God with such clarity.

We don't have the Damascus Road floodlight - we have a bedside lamp with an energy saving bulb.

No heavenly megaphone just the vague hunch or persistent wondering.

We do have moments of spiritual clarity, when it feels like God might actually be on the line, but most often it's in the ordinary.

Listening to music.

In conversation with someone who understands us.

Sitting in quiet or holding someone in the light of a prayer.

Maybe a Sunday morning lining up to take bread and wine...

But it would be a mistake to think that because something is prosaic or humdrum that it isn't extraordinary, to imagine that the routine and mundane can't also hold the eternal.

The mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart knew this when he said, 'God is like someone who coughs, while hiding.'

It's in the humdrum of the everyday that we are called to be converted, even in the communities we find ourselves in.

Barack Obama's mother was an atheist, his father, a Muslim. His mother took him to churches and temples but he always remained observer rather than observant.

This changed when he became a community organizer in Chicago in his twenties.

He saw how the black church experience strengthened people in difficult circumstances – and this social vision drew him to their faith.

He writes, 'I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world. A source of hope.'

Obama began to see that story as part of a greater story about hope for everyone – stretching from the Hebrews under Pharaoh in Egypt to Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King to everyone living with injustice in the present day.

He wanted to be in that story too and so he decided to be baptized. 'It wasn't an epiphany,' he says of his conversion. 'It was much more of a gradual process...'

We remember how Saul heard a heavenly voice and was struck blind but we forget that it was his subsequent immersion in the early Christian communities that sealed his conversion to the way of Jesus.

Here's where he found ways to carry his questions, where he found a community of love, acceptance and service which would shape his life and change history.

Paul turned towards God in a million choices over the months and years that followed.

His conversion took his whole life.

We can't turn to God in a moment. Only in a lifetime.

If Saul's conversion was born in epiphany, it grew in community.

He said his prayers, read the Scriptures, swapped stories of Jesus and shared bread and wine - the stuff we do.

He fell out and fell in with people – also the stuff we do - but the network of early believers showed him how to keep turning to God.

If few of us are converted instantly, none of us are converted in isolation.

It is too difficult to follow Jesus of Nazareth on our own, too easy to give up.

We are called to travel together – dazzling each other with our strange light, and miraculous words, healing our many blindnesses, finding our new names, our different vocations.

The daily conversion of finding who Love has made us to be.

At the Greenbelt Festival a few years back, Diarmaid McCullough, professor of Church History at Oxford, explained why the way of Jesus Christ is still followed today – even though it is often unrecognisable from the way the first Christians practiced it.

It's the change that keeps it alive.

'If Christianity remains a questioning faith,' he said. 'It will never die.'

He recalled a meal with Herbert McCabe, Dominican priest and philosopher, who said to him:

'I don't think Christianity is the answer. I think it is the question.'

Saul's conversion started with a question. 'Saul, Saul, why are you giving me such a hard time?'

Every conversion begins with hearing the question life is asking of us.

I began this talk with a personal story of conversion and I'll end with another.

God asked me a question last year.

It became a bit of a conversation, so I made notes.

She said, 'you know you're getting on a bit?'

I said, 'yes, thanks, for that'.

'And you're self-employed,' she continued, 'so you have to think about retirement?'

I said, 'I suppose so'.

'And you have a pension?'

'Yes.'

'Well is that investment killing people?'

'What do you mean?' I asked God, thinking she was being a bit of a drama queen.

She said are the companies your pension is invested in using your money to make profits from deforestation or from new fossil fuel projects? Are they using your pension to heat up the world even more?

I said, 'I haven't checked but I know your next question.'

She said, 'very good, we're finally starting to understand each other.'

And when I checked I found some of my pension was invested in a household name bank which says it's going net-zero but in fact continues to invest in starting new oil and gas and coal projects all over the world.

It was a hassle but I switched to a green pension fund and when I told God she said moving your pension is more effective in fighting climate change than giving up flying, going vegetarian and switching energy provider... but she also said we could talk about those another day.

Anyway, that's my memory of the conversation with God. It might have got mixed up with some of my own stuff.

Only when we ask questions of ourselves can God convert us.

And we are each converted gradually, imperceptibly, every day.

Sometimes the dramatic will jolt us to our senses, when a revelation pulls our lives into sharp focus.

Mostly we do not notice the dazzling light because we forget it is present in the eyes of everyone we meet, the voice of everyone we speak to.

Slowly, in company and service, month by month, year by year, we turn to the way of Jesus.

Most of the time we do not realise that every road we will ever travel is called the Damascus Road.