

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 4th May 2025 i.e. 3rd Sunday of Easter.

Acts 9:1-6 [7-20]

Rev. 5:11-end

John 21:1-19

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

As many of you will know, I was raised in the Church of England. Both my parents are “cradle Anglicans”, although their journeys have been very different. They had my brother and I christened soon after we were born, and when they went to church they took us along with them. That goes a long way towards explaining why I'm here today.

The Church of England generally suits me. But every tradition has its blind-spots; this one is no exception. Some of those blind-spots belong to me too, by temperament and also by training. I noticed one of those blind-spots as I was looking at the readings set for this Sunday.

I hope you'll allow me to generalise for a moment. Among Christians Anglicans generally struggle with the language of conversion. Unlike many other denominations we don't have a practical theology of conversion: the structures and conventions of the Church of England assume that as long as you live here, you are a member by default. You see that, for example, in what Canon Law says about baptism – basically, everyone is entitled to it. You also see it in the legalities around marriage in Anglican churches. As clergy and lay officers across the country prepare for their Annual Parochial Church meetings there are lots of conversations about who gets to have their name on the Electoral Roll; who gets to be present for what part of the meeting; who gets to vote for what... Contrast all of this with pretty much every other denomination of Christianity and it seems that by design at least the Church of England is extraordinarily inclusive. I would argue that the message the Church of England tacitly sends in all of this is that conversion is unnecessary: whoever you are, you don't need to change; you are already entitled to be here.

I remember in my twenties first encountering people in Anglican churches who had a story of personal conversion. I remember being surprised when one of my friends – someone who used to be an atheist – told me that becoming a Christian made a big difference to her life. In my naivety I had to do a double take. It had never occurred to me before that someone might talk that way about belonging to the Church of England: belonging to the Baptist church maybe; or the Roman Catholic church; but not the Church of England, in all its Established glory.

Let me be clear: I think there's something precious about the structural inclusivity of the Church of England, and I think that that basic inclusivity is a good reason to pursue even greater degrees of inclusivity. It's also a reason to be ashamed of the ways Anglicans have historically conspired to exclude other sorts of Christians from public life. I believe we have a moral duty to make our churches as consistently welcoming to as wide a group of people as possible; I admit we still have a very long way to go on that. At the same time, and in tension with that, I also want to argue that because Anglicanism doesn't have a well-developed theology of conversion we are missing something, something that other Christian groups intuitively understand better than we do. I'd like to try to sketch what that might be.

When Christians have tried to describe what conversion might mean, an example they frequently use is Saul of Tarsus, the man who became Saint Paul. We read the most famous account of his conversion a few minutes ago. Saul is a persecutor of the early Church; he is on his way to persecute another group of Christians when he is struck blind, and finds himself in conversation with Jesus Christ, a conversation that profoundly changes him. In a similar vein, many Christians (especially Protestants) will describe a dramatic experience in which God revealed himself to them; as a result they question everything they previously took for granted. God tells them they need to change, so they abandon their livelihoods, their former relationships, their basic assumptions about right and wrong, and they become Christians. Whether you're a Christian or not, that's probably what you think religious conversion looks like. It is a powerful force for good in individual lives and in society. It's how people first realise and then overturn both ancient injustices and personal failings.

What's weird is it's not a very good description of what really happened to Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus. Talking with Jesus Christ did lead him to question many things; his relationship with Christian people certainly changed a lot. But even when he changed his name he never stopped calling himself a Jew and a Pharisee [e.g. Philippians 3:5]. Paul described Gentiles “converting” from the worship of idols to Christianity [*epistrepho*, e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1:9], but he describes his own change of heart as a “call” to preach in a new way [*kaleo*, e.g. Galatians 1:11-17]. It's also worth remembering that for the first few centuries Christianity remained a variety of Judaism: despite Paul's work preaching to Gentiles the Church continued to be attached to the synagogues of the Jewish Diaspora, and many Christians assumed you had to be a Jew in order to be a Christian. Since the late twentieth century scholars have rightly questioned whether it makes sense to say Paul converted at all; maybe it's better to use his own words, and say that he was

“called” to be a Jew in a new way.

Still, Christians have always embraced the language of conversion. Paul used it to talk about Gentiles who came around to worshipping just one God instead of many. Later, when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christians carried on talking about the need for conversion. Saint Benedict wrote a rule of life for Christian monks; and the three vows he expected monks to take were vows of stability, conversion, and obedience. Conversion here doesn't just mean becoming a Christian where you weren't one before: it might involve a key moment of change, but it also implies a continuing way of life – a monk is committed to carry on converting. This is continuous with what we say about penitence: every day we are confronted by new challenges, new opportunities to turn away from selfishness and towards the love of God. Conversion is learning to be patient even when you're tired and hungry. Conversion is trying to stop doing that thing that you know your wife finds annoying, and so on. It's only possible to make a Christian community if people are cooperating with God in doing that work.

And that brings me to our Gospel reading for today. Peter is another one who changes his name, and he also never stops converting. Peter is not a saint because he always gets it right. In most of the ways that normally matter he is all too similar to Judas Iscariot; his betrayal was perhaps just as devastating. The thing that makes Peter a saint is that when he is confronted by his mistakes he is ready and able to turn again and embrace the love of God, whatever that looks like, however many times it takes. So in this story he is tender, almost bashful: when the other disciple tells him that the Lord is standing on the beach he jumps into the water and swims rather than helping all of the others with the boat and the fish. And then you have that incredibly poignant dialogue after breakfast where Jesus keeps asking him if he loves him, and Peter has to keep saying yes. Many people have said that it's as if Jesus is undoing Peter's betrayal, replacing three “nos” with three “yeses”. So Peter too is a model for Christian conversion: the conversion that keeps working away at sin no matter how many times it takes.

Where does all of this leave us? Like Peter and Paul and Benedict, I want to be able to affirm both sides of conversion. We have a basic human need sometimes to draw a line under something; to say, an old pattern has ended, and a new pattern has begun. That sort of conversion experience might well be at the beginning of our Christian story. I want us to be able to affirm that, to make space for it to happen afresh when it needs to, and to encourage people to share those stories. At the same time, I want to retain that classically Anglican sense that your being here doesn't depend on you having a dramatic story to tell. Perhaps it's useful and gratifying to have a story like that; but the

conversion that ought really to matter to us is the daily conversion of self-examination, repentance and deliberate growth in love, by God's grace.

I would especially like that sort of conversion to be a mark of our church community here. I cannot promise it will be easy; all I know is that it is necessary and that if God is with us it will never stop, we will never stop converting.

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