

The Death of Conversion Third Week of Easter Friday, April 15, 2016 7:30 PM
Acts 9:1-20; Jn 6:52-59 (Healing Mass) (Maybe whatever it is you think makes you who you are is exactly what God wants you to let go of.)

“Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank.”

This is the story of the conversion of St. Paul. The whole theme of conversion is very basic to the teachings of Christ; in fact, he began his ministry with the announcement that we all had to be converted, *metanoia* in Greek, often translated “repentance.” But the word “repentance” doesn’t quite get to the full meaning of **conversion. It’s a change of a way of being and includes a change in the way of thinking and feeling and perceiving and relating to oneself and to God and to others.** So it’s a radical change and conversion; it’s a radical difference. Jesus also said, “No one can pour new wine into old skins.” The old skins represent the life that we have led and the way we have been thinking about God, about our problems.

What really influences us is not what happens to us; it’s how we think about what happens to us. That’s what imprints itself on our life. And very often the way we think about what happens to us must change if we are ever to be free. If we are ever to live in the freedom of the children of God, we have to think in a new way. St. Teresa of Avila said that very often our memories are simply wrong because what we remember about our past excludes the presence of God, but God was there. God is always with us, but we are often not with God. **We are often unaware of God’s presence.** And this lack of awareness skews our memory, creates false memories of “poor little me” all abandoned. Well, no, you were never abandoned. **We are all called on to suffer in this world, to endure in this world all the effects of humanity, which means the effects of how people use their free wills or don’t, which affects everybody.** And we have to bear with it, true; but **we are never abandoned because God has come in Christ to bear with us our burdens,** to share our suffering and to share our death. And Christ never disappears, but **we can lose contact and thus we create all kinds of bad habits** of looking at ourselves, of thinking about ourselves, of feeling all kinds of negativity: abandonment, rejection, which is connected to resentment and/or anger and/or fear and many other negative things. And in the wake of all that comes a great deal of ill. **It’s God’s will to change us, but we have to be agents of change ourselves because we are free.** We are free to cooperate or not.

Now we have in this case **St. Paul**, who at this time was Saul, really dedicated to God, yes, but a God he misunderstood entirely. He was trying to serve God, but he didn’t actually know him. He thought he did. He was full of enthusiasm for the tradition of his elders, and he talks about that. He was zealous in carrying on the tradition of his elders. God had other plans for him. But in a sense, it wasn’t that hard for God to change him because **he already was enthusiastic; he just didn’t understand.** So God caused him to go blind for three days. **As Jesus was three days in the darkness of the tomb, Paul was three days in blindness. And conversion requires a kind of death.** *Metanoia*, repentance, wherever you want to call it, requires a kind of death. And these three days in Damascus were days of death, and Paul neither ate nor drank. **He was leaving behind life as he knew it.**

If we want what God has in mind for us, we have to leave behind life as we know it. That could be rather scary, but that's why we have to trust that God has better plans, better ways than we do, than we remember, than we've experienced. Conversion requires that we are willing to die to the self we've always known **and let God draw up something different.** If you had told Saul before he took off on the road to Damascus that he was going to be a great apostle for the Christ, he would have laughed at you. But he did; he became one of the greatest of all disciples, one of the greatest of all missionaries.

So what does God want to do in your life? That's what you have to ask yourself. **What does God want you to leave behind?** What are all the tapes that keep playing in your mind? What are all the feelings you keep returning to? What are all the typical reactions you have to other people? What is it that you think makes you who you are: your family, your job, your possessions, your intelligence? What—what is it? **Maybe whatever it is you think makes you who you are is exactly the problem? Maybe that is exactly what God wants you to let go of,** as Paul had to let go of his zeal for the Torah. And God replaced his zeal for the Torah with zeal for the kingdom of God.

Now as I said, Paul was already a man of goodwill because he was doing what he thought God wanted. He was simply ignorant. **But sometimes we really don't want to do what God wants.** Sometimes we are really living with a kind of pride, and that we really think we know what's what, and we just don't really imagine there could be anything other than what is; and if we are ever to be happy, then everyone else has to change. So a lot of people are like that. **They can't imagine anything about themselves that isn't authentic,** that isn't just right, that isn't what must be, so **if they are going to be happy, then the world has to change,** then their family has to change, then their circumstances have to change. **Is this the road Jesus walked: changing everybody else? Or is the road Jesus walked offering everyone the goodness that he knew, the love that he knew, the hope that he had for the future for the plan of God, for the providence of God, to take root in people's lives?**

So today as we read about St. Paul and his conversion, it is important that we keep in mind that **we all need a similar conversion. We all need to let the Lord do whatever it is he wants to do.** And it's precisely in giving up our preferences that we are submitting to the will of God, that we are **joining with Jesus in his surrender to the Father.** This is the way that leads to eternal life. This is the way that leads to eternal happiness. Why should we delay?