

Father Philip's Address to St Paul's Assembly

Friday 24th January 2014
Theme for the week: St Paul

Matthew 3:13-17

Tomorrow the Church celebrates the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. It is the day when we remember the story we heard about in our bible reading today where we heard how Paul, who was known as Saul, went about persecuting the Church and Christians until he had a vision of Jesus – the story which is shown in the painting on the screen with Saul having fallen off his horse and Jesus calling out “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Now, you would think that as Chaplain of St Paul's College that I will devote the beginning of my talk today talking about Saint Paul, our patron Saint of this College of Saint Paul's.

But I am not.

Instead I am going to start by talking about the Patron Saint of another School, down the road.

Saint Stephen.

Stephen is, of course, the Patron Saint of Saint Stephen's Girls' College nearby.

Stephen was a Deacon. He was ordained in the Church to serve in a special ministry of Deacon. In the Church we have what we call three 'Orders' of ordained Ministry.

We have

- Bishops – and our Bishop here on Hong Kong Island is Bishop Paul.
- Priests – such as myself, who work for the Bishop, celebrating the Eucharist, baptising, forgiving sins, preaching the Gospel and
- Deacons – who have a particular ministry of service, at the altar and also in the community, working with the poor, the sick, widows and other pastoral work.

Every Bishop was first a Deacon and a Priest, and every Priest is first ordained a Deacon. I was ordained a Deacon a year before I was a priest.

So Saint Stephen was a Deacon. Ordained to help minister to the widows and others who were in need.

We don't even need to walk as far as the Girls' School before we come across Saint Stephen.

The Church next door is under the protection of Saint Stephen.

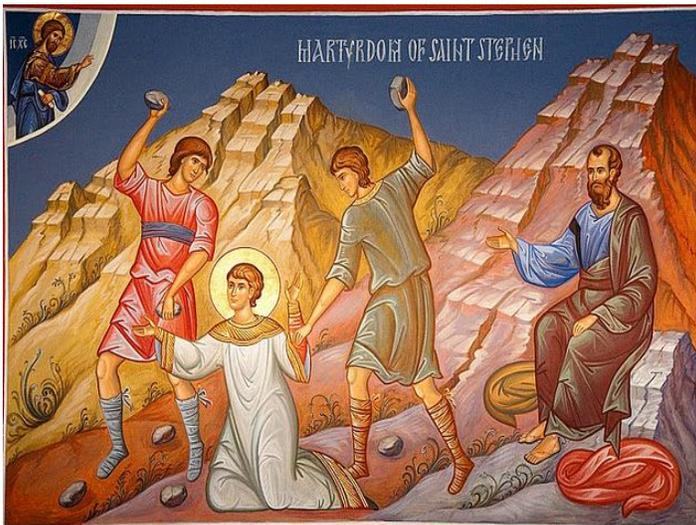
And you know, in some ways it might be seen as a bit strange that Saint Stephen's is next door to Saint Paul's.

Because in the Bible we know that Stephen was killed, by being stoned, and Paul was one of the people who was there when Stephen was stoned to death and allowed it to happen.

At that time Paul was known as Saul – he took the name Paul later on. In the Book of Acts we read that:

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him.

Stephen suffered a terrible death of having large stones or rocks thrown at him until he died.



This icon shows us that event, and on the right is Saul – our Patron Paul, sitting down watching it, and allowing it to happen.

So our Patron, Paul, not only witnessed a murder, he allowed it to happen. He consented to it, and he sat by and did not stop it.

And he did so because he believed that Christians should be stopped. He believed that Christians should not be allowed to worship or preach or gather together, and he began a strong campaign to imprison Christians and persecute them.

You may think that the persecution of Christians is something of history, that exists only in the Bible.

But it is still happening in the world today. It happens everywhere, but there are some countries where there is extreme persecution which takes place. This map is the presentation of the different levels of persecution of Christians around the world last year according to one group.



We are fortunate here in Hong Kong.

The Basic Law of Hong Kong makes it clear that all residents should have the freedom of religious belief and the freedom to preach and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public.

In other words, if Paul did in Hong Kong today what he did in Jerusalem all those years ago, he would be breaking the law here. Because Stephen would have been protected.

So why is it that we now are proud of Saint Paul? Why is it that we overlook or forgive him his part in persecution and call him a Saint and a holy man?

It is because of his conversion. Because he was confronted by Jesus with the news that Jesus is God and that in persecuting Christians, Paul was persecuting God himself.

And Saul was converted, baptised with the name Paul and became a Christian. He became what he had been persecuting. And he went to the Christian communities and told them that he wanted to be part of them.

You can imagine how those communities felt. How those early Churches felt. They had heard about him. They knew that he imprisoned Christians and treated them badly. And it took quite a bit of convincing to make them realise that he had converted.

It is sometimes difficult to trust people when we think that they might harm us. But that is the wonderful thing about the love of God.

Last term I spoke about the Church in Peshawar and how the Church there had been bombed.

While that was a terrible event, one beautiful event that came out of it was when Muslims and other Christians came out and demonstrated in support of the Christian community there.



A similar example of that solidarity was shown the other way around, when Christians in Egypt formed a ring around Muslims to protect them as they took part in their prayers.



The celebration of the Conversion of Saint Paul reminds us that people CAN change. We sang in our hymn this morning about Saul, breathing threats and hate – which turned to words of love.

It is a celebration which reminds us that people who we may think would be against each other, can work together and support each other and show the love of God.

It is also a celebration which reminds us that WE can change. Are there things about our life – how we treat other people – classmates, workmates, friends, family, domestic workers, janitors – which need changing? Do we treat people we know and those we don't know equally or do we discriminate?

Do we look at all other people and recognise their dignity and the fact that they are made in the image and likeness of God, or do we only treat well those who we like?

There may be other things in our lives which we may want to change, or start anew. The message of the Conversion of Saint Paul reminds us that it is NEVER too late. We can make those changes and we can follow more closely in the steps of Christ in his love for all people.

The Conversion of Paul was big and dramatic. Our conversions may be big and loud, but they may also be small and quiet. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that we make an attempt to change our lives to be more respectful, more loving and more Christ like.

May Saint Paul, our patron, pray for us and support us as we try to live a life worthy of the Gospel.

Thank you.

Lord,
we celebrate the conversion of Saint Paul,
who you chose to carry your name to the whole world.
Help us to make our way towards you
by following in his footsteps,
and by witnessing to your truth
before the men and women of our day.
We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.