

Assembly 19 January 2009

St. Paul

The 25th January is St. Paul's Day. As we shall be on holiday on the 25th, I would like to tell you little about the life of St. Paul, after whom our College is named.

Saint Paul is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in the history of the Western world. Just a quick look at the headlines of his life is enough to understand his impact. His works are some of the earliest Christian documents that we possess, 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament of the Bible were written by him, and he's the central figure in another, the Acts of the Apostles. Paul travelled thousands of kilometres around the Mediterranean Sea spreading the word of Jesus and it was Paul who came up with the doctrine that would turn Christianity from the belief of a small group of Jews into a worldwide faith that is open to all.

What we know about Paul comes from two extraordinary sources. The first is the Acts of the Apostles, written after Paul's death, almost certainly by the same author who wrote St. Luke's gospel. There is evidence that Acts was written to pass on the Christian message but behind the theology there are clues about Paul's life. The author of Acts claims that he knew Paul and even accompanied him on many of his journeys. The second source is Paul's own letters. They represent Paul's own version of events, and it seems reasonable to accept them as the more reliable account.

Unlike the Twelve Apostles, there is no indication that Paul had met Jesus before Jesus was crucified. The one thing most people do know about Paul, however, is that he underwent a dramatic conversion to Christianity while travelling to Damascus. According to the Acts of the Apostles, he experienced a vision of the resurrected Jesus, after which he was temporarily blinded. Paul claimed that he received the Gospel not from man, but by "the revelation of Jesus Christ".

But what do we know about Saint Paul? Reading Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles we know that Paul was born in Tarsus, in Turkey. He was a tent maker by trade but was also a very keen student who was tutored by a leading Jewish teacher in Jerusalem. Here we have a man who worked with his hands but who could read and write with ease, particularly in the Greek language. Scholars who have analysed his writings have drawn a picture of Paul: a hot-headed man, quick to defend his honour and the honour of his followers but who demanded loyalty in return. Paul wrote some of the most beautiful and important passages in the whole of the Bible. He was the first great Christian theologian, establishing some of the building blocks of the faith that we now take for granted.

The importance of Paul's conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus cannot be underestimated. In his younger years, Paul was very anti-Christian and persecuted any follower of Jesus with whom he came into contact. But from the day he became a

Christian, Paul preached the gospel far and wide; that Christ was crucified for the sins of all people.

Paul undertook three great missionary journeys, covering many of the lands in the Eastern Mediterranean; Turkey, Greece, Cyprus and the great cities of Jerusalem and Rome. There is no doubt that Paul was a tough character. He could take all kinds of controversy and suffering. In one or two of his letters, he has long lists of the things that he has endured. Paul writes about the number of times he had been beaten; the number of times he had been put in prison; and the number of shipwrecks he had survived. He was physically quite weak but he always attributed his staying power to the grace of God. Clearly, Paul believed that he was experiencing the power of God through suffering.

The Bible does not tell us how or when the Paul died; and history does not provide us with any information. The only thing we have to go on is the Christian tradition which has Paul being sent to prison 3 times, and on his third time, still refusing to forsake the Lord his God, being put to death by the Emperor Nero in Rome.

Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, the capital of modern day Syria, is believed to have happened in 36 AD. Today, Anglicans and Roman Catholics around the world celebrate this event, the Conversion of St. Paul, on the 25th January each year.

Maybe it had something to do with Paul's personality, but during mediaeval times in Europe, people believed the weather on St. Paul's Day to be an indicator of their fortune in the months to come.

If Saint Paul's day be fair and clear,
It doth betide a happy year;
If blustering winds do blow aloft,
Then wars will trouble our realm full oft,
If clouds or mist do dark the sky,
Great store of birds and beasts shall die;
And if by chance to snow or rain,
Then will be dear all sorts of grain.

This coming Sunday let us remember the life and faith of St. Paul.

J.R. Kennard

Acknowledgement: the above passages are taken from the BBC website: Religion and Ethics (Christianity).