

25. January 2020

## “The conversion of St. Paul”

*Acts 22, 3-16*

*I am a Jew', Paul said, 'and was born at Tarsus in Cilicia. I was brought up here in this city. It was under Gamaliel that I studied and was taught the exact observance of the Law of our ancestors. In fact, I was as full of duty towards God as you all are today. I even persecuted this Way to the death and sent women as well as men to prison in chains as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify. I even received letters from them to the brothers in Damascus, which I took with me when I set off to bring prisoners back from there to Jerusalem for punishment. It happened that I was on that journey and nearly at Damascus when in the middle of the day a bright light from heaven suddenly shone round me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" I answered, "Who are you, Lord?" and he said to me, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting. "The people with me saw the light but did not hear the voice which spoke to me. I said, "What am I to do, Lord?" The Lord answered, "Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told what you have been appointed to do." Since the light had been so dazzling that I was blind, I got to Damascus only because my companions led me by the hand. Someone called Ananias, a devout follower of the Law and highly thought of by all the Jews living there, came to see me; he stood beside me and said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight." Instantly my sight came back and I was able to see him. Then he said, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Upright One and hear his own voice speaking, because you are to be his witness before all humanity, testifying to what you have seen and heard. And now why delay? Hurry and be baptised and wash away your sins, calling on his name."*

It is a great joy to hear again and again the story of St. Paul's conversion and all that came out of it!

To this day we read his letters and are nourished by his teachings, just as the first Christian communities of the different nations he formed and strengthened did.

St. Paul was a devout man. As he himself testified, he lived strictly according to the rules of the Pharisees and tried earnestly to fulfill the commandments of God.

But his zeal for religion was blind! We could also take the word fanatical, for he persecuted the Christians and was complicit in the death of St. Stephen.

But we know that God had mercy on him.

Paul was struck by the light of the Lord and from that moment he entered into the service of Christ. His conversion was not from unbelief to faith or from a sinful way of life to a way of life that respects the commandments of God! No, it was different: it was an illumination, and in this light Paul recognizes his error and changes his life!

The Christians were not the enemies of God, as he suspected before, they were not the ones who threatened Judaism, but they were the ones who recognized the Messiah and on whom the promise of Israel was fulfilled.

The scales fell from his eyes and now he could truly see! His blindness completely disappeared from him and he became a witness of Christ!

Perhaps we can see in Paul's conversion a model for the enlightenment of those who are zealous in their religion but do not yet have the light to recognize Christ as the Messiah. Of course they must first free themselves from all fanaticism, for this does not come from the Holy Spirit, but is a blindness of the emotions and of reason, and a hardening of the heart.

The constant prayer of the faithful is needed so that all may recognize the Lord! Of course, this will not always happen in such a dramatic way as in the story of St. Paul. But there are many witnesses, both Muslims and Jews, who meet Jesus in an extraordinary way: through dreams, visions, etc. In fact, miracles and visions in the biblical context are not as exceptional as they are presented to us by a world marked by rationalism.

What else can we contribute, apart from our prayer, so that others may know Christ, the Messiah, if we have not been called, like St. Paul, to announce the Gospel throughout the world?

The essential thing is to sincerely walk our own path of conversion. Understanding that all men are called by God as His children, any sincere attempt to follow and serve God completely is fruitful for all men in a hidden way!

Furthermore, we should be careful not to fail to give a testimony of our faith when the right moment comes! If we are attentive to the Holy Spirit, we will be able to perceive that moment.

However, we can always bear witness to people through our Christian being so that they can perceive that we have true joy in our hearts and may find God's love in us.