

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jan 25th 2014

"I persecuted this Way to death."

"I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting."

"Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature."

Paul's story is a fascinating one. He is a zealous Jew, who is, by his own admission, a murderous persecutor of the followers of the new "way" of Jesus. Then, he gets stopped in his tracks by a personal encounter with Jesus.

Apart from the extraordinary characteristics of Paul's conversion, it strikes me that we have these conversion moments as well. We are stopped, turned around, re-orientated. Sometimes it is an awareness, "Wow, I'm being bullheaded and stubborn here and it is not making me or anyone else happy." Sometimes, it is a self-defeating pattern, which finally gets defeating enough that I don't like doing it any more: "I've been in denial about what I'm doing to myself here, but I am really getting tired of this addiction, this cycle, this rut I'm in." Sometimes, we are blessed enough to have a loved one or a friend who loves us enough to simply confront us - to tell us what we've been doing - and we have the openness at that moment to hear it and accept it. Sometimes, it is actually a religious experience. We hear something from the scriptures differently, or we turn to the Lord and feel the connection, or we experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation and feel the grace of being forgiven. At the deepest level, conversion comes to us when our hearts are drawn to the love of the one who loves us unconditionally. Affection, deep gratitude, turn our hearts, open us up and affection and gratitude lead to changes.

On a feast like this, we can pause and simply ask for the grace of conversion. That openness to grace, that desire for greater freedom and greater union with the one who loves us.

Another surprising part of this story is how Jesus identifies himself to Paul. He says that he is the one Paul is persecuting. He completely identifies with his people. Pope Francis spoke about this in a talk he gave on the Body of Christ:

"St Paul's experience speaks to us of how profound the union between us Christians and Christ really is. When Jesus ascended into heaven he did not leave us orphans, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit our union with him became even more intense. The Second Vatican Council says that 'by communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation'" (Lumen Gentium, n. 7)

"Dear brothers and sisters, let us ask God: help us to be members of the Body of the Church, ever more deeply united to Christ; help us not to cause the Body of the Church to suffer through our conflicts, our divisions, our selfishness. Help us to be living limbs bound one to the other by that unique force, love, which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5)." [Pope Francis: General Audience - on the Church as the Body of Christ - June 19, 2013]

It gets very deep, but it is very simple. We are one body, when are one in Jesus. He is our brother and

he identifies with us, completely. None of us can ever say we are alone. And, as members of this body, we can ask for the grace to grow in a sense of feeling, sensing, appreciating that when any one of us suffers, the whole of us suffer - because we are connected.

Of course, this is difficult to experience, while I feel alienated, angry, threatened by one of my brothers or sisters. But, it all becomes possible and make sense, when I let myself be love, experience conversion, and receive a new mission, a new purpose. Paul was just as zealous in telling others about Jesus for the rest of his life, as he was an opponent to Jesus' way before his conversion.

Pope Francis tells us in his Exhortation, "Joy of the Gospel," that it starts with our experiencing the joy of the Good News of God's love for us. From there, we are a new person, ready to share that joy with others. We can imagine - even dream about - how much different we might be, and how different our families and relationships might be if we were more freed by joy. As Francis tells us, it is with a spirit of joy that we will spread the Good News. When people see how happy we are, people will want to be part of this community of joy.

"The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come." [The Joy of the Gospel - #1]

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