

Sermon 6 May 2018

The Swiss Church in London

Reading Galatians 1:11-24

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.

Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.

Paul the Apostle: An ambitious man. His upbringing and conversion

Introduction

To talk about Paul the Apostle is challenging and to be honest I usually try to avoid him.

No doubt, Paul is one of the most important personalities in Christianity. As the author of most of the letters in the New Testament he has shaped Christian theology like no one else and his importance cannot be underestimated. Thanks to Paul the Gospel of Christ spread across the world. Without Paul, Christianity might never have turned into the world religion it is today.

And yet, Paul is a controversial figure. His teaching is radical and some of his views contributed to the discrimination of women, Jews and gay people. In Paul's opinion, women were to be submissive to their husbands, they were not to teach in the church and were to remain silent (Col 3:18 and 1 Cor 14:34). In the letter to the Romans (1:26-28) Paul condemns gay and lesbian relationships as shameful. His criticism against Judaism, the very religion he grew up with, contributed to antisemitism over centuries, and he also justified slavery. Furthermore the language of his letters is very hard to understand and often creates more confusion than clarity.

There are many reasons to turn away from Paul. Yet he is so crucial to our understanding of the life and death of Jesus that we cannot ignore him and his teachings.

Today we want to learn more about his upbringing and his conversion.

Biography

Paul, who was in fact given the name Saul by his parents, was born in the city of Tarsus in modern-day Turkey situated near the North-Eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Tarsus was a trading city and cultural melting pot. Romans, Greeks and Jews lived and worked in Tarsus and Paul's education was shaped by the different cultures. He spoke several languages. His parents were citizens of the Roman Empire, as was he, which means that Paul had a fairly privileged background and could travel freely.

Paul grew up a devoted Jew, which was his family's religion, and as a child or teenager, Paul was sent to Jerusalem to learn from the best Rabbis. He was an excellent scholar and a quick learner, as he says about himself: "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." He surely didn't lack self-confidence!

Paul was a Pharisee and therefore belonged to the religious elite of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees were known for being particularly strict Tora scholars and they meticulously observed the laws of the Holy Scripture. With their strict views they were not very tolerant of others.

Perhaps this explains why Paul turned into a fierce and brutal persecutor of the new movement that spread quickly among the Jewish population. The followers of this new movement were disciples of Jesus Christ and believed that he was the long expected Messiah as announced in the Tora. We have to remember: at that time, Christianity was not a religion in its own right. The Jesus movement that later became the Christian religion was a Jewish movement. Paul the Pharisee profoundly disapproved of their reform efforts. He wanted to destroy this new religious movement he later became part of and eradicate the disciples of Christ.

The Jesus movement was seen by the religious elite as a threat to their authority and to religious unity within Judaism.

The stoning of Stephen

The systematic persecution of Jesus followers began with a particularly brutal event described in the Book of Acts, chapter 6. We hear of a man called Stephen. He was a disciple of Jesus and a follower and leader of the new movement. Stephen was placed on trial, convicted for blasphemy and condemned to death. They dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. This is when we first hear about Paul in the Bible. Paul was watching the stoning and approved of what was happening. After the stoning of Stephen, a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. In Acts 7 it says: "Saul was ravaging house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."

Ambition

Paul clearly was a very ambitious young man. He made no concessions to his beliefs and when he believed in something, he saw this as the only truth.

To be ambitious can be an admirable quality in people. A healthy portion of ambition is a motor for new ideas, creativity and knowledge and helps us to achieve great things. Political change would not happen without ambition. We wouldn't know half of what we know about our planet and the universe without the men and woman who set out to discover it. And without the ambition of our Swiss ancestors in London, the Swiss Church would not have been founded.

Yet ambition can also turn into obsession. The needs of those around us can easily fall victim to our ambitious goals, and our vision becomes blurred. This is what happened to Paul. He took his own ambitions for God's calling and justified his violence in God's name.

In his stubbornness and short-sightedness he was unable to see the value of the beliefs of others.

Conversion

Paul's over-ambitious attitude and intolerant beliefs misled him and made him blind as he admitted himself in several of his letters.

Until one day his life reached a turning point.

Paul was on his way back from Damascus where he had travelled with the commission of the chief priests, when he had a vision. A very bright light suddenly appeared, brighter than the sun, and a voice said to him: "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" It was Jesus himself speaking to him, the one that Paul was persecuting.

This event, which is also the moment when Paul changed his name, is often called the conversion of Paul, although it wasn't strictly speaking a conversion. Paul didn't change religion. He was a Jew who changed from holding the very strict views of the Pharisees to adopting the views of the reform movement of the Jesus followers. The man who formerly persecuted the followers of Christ was now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.

It is therefore no wonder that Paul was at first met with suspicion by the other Apostles in Jerusalem. The persecutor suddenly supported their cause. But Paul in his unshakable faith didn't need the approval of others. For him the gospel he preached was not of human origin. He did not receive it from any man, nor was he taught it; rather, he received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. Again, we recognise his ambition and self-confidence, this time put in the service of the Jesus movement.

Paul went to Arabia and Damascus for a few years to seek deeper understanding and insight and to develop his theology. He returned to Jerusalem for a while, and to his parental home in Tarsus. Don't we all need sometimes some time off to gain deeper understanding of the world, and to think about things without being influenced by the opinion of others? Paul might have developed his theology during this silent time.

One of Paul's key achievements was that he opened up the Jesus movement to everyone, not just Jewish people. Everyone who believed in Jesus as the Messiah could become a Christian, and that's how Christianity could spread across the cultures and countries. Paul himself later faced persecution, and was finally sentenced to death and crucified, like Jesus himself.

The challenge for us today is to consolidate Paul's violent past and his incredible achievements for Christianity, his discriminatory views and his profound theology explaining the meaning of the Cross to us. Paul is a complex character, but aren't we all? Sometimes we have to go a long way to gain each other's trust.

In June we will continue our journey with Paul and learn about the incredible journeys he undertook to bring the gospel to the people, and we will learn more about his theology. And perhaps this will help us to understand Paul in a new way and discover aspects that will deepen our faith.

Amen