



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

## The Conversion of St. Paul January 26, 2014

### ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

*“Suddenly, there shined round about him a light from Heaven, and he fell to the earth, and hear a voice saying unto him, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” And Saul said, “Who art thou Lord?” And the Lord said, “ I am Jesus, whom thou persecutes. It is hard for you to kick against the pricks.” And Saul, trembling and astonished said, “Lord, what wilt thou have me do?”*

The difference between Christianity and the world can be discerned by juxtaposing the story of St. Paul and Plato's parable of 'the cave'. In Plato's story, a community lives in the dark of a cave, which is lit only by a fire. The shadows on the wall of the cave become reality, though it is a distorted and grotesque picture of the true forms that cast the shadows. A man finds his way to the mouth of the cave, where he is blinded by the light of the sun. As his eyes adjust, he returns to the cave to tell his friends what he has seen. There, because his vision is so radical, he is put to death and the community is destined to live forever in darkness.

The pre-conversion world of St. Paul is like the cave. He sees the innocence of St. Stephen as threatening, and his vision of the world is as twisted as the distorted and twisted shadows on the wall of the cave. St Paul's encounter with the Light, Jesus, temporarily blinds him as well, but even though he also is ultimately killed by the people of this worldly cave, the result is not despair, but hope and transcendence. The outcome is that the church he founds for the

Gentiles channels the Light of God to every corner of the world and to every person in the world. That is the difference between Christianity and the world.

Today, in this season of Epiphany, we celebrate St. Paul's encounter with the Light and the church that grew from his personal Epiphany. The post conversion St. Paul is a man of grace, peace, courage, tolerance and charity; everything we should embrace and celebrate, and yet, we don't embrace St Paul. The fact that we don't embrace him, should be instructive for us and we need to attentive to that instruction.

St. Paul was born to privilege. He was a Roman citizen, even though he was a Jew. He studied at the feet of Gamaliel, the most famous Rabbi of the time. It was Gamaliel who advised the Sanhedrin when they were imprisoning the Apostles for preaching in the Temple after the Resurrection. His advice was to leave the Apostles be, that if their movement was of God, than nothing the Sanhedrin could do would confound it, and if it was not of God, it would come to nothing anyway.

Even though St. Paul was the disciple of a man who seemed wise and tolerant, the young St. Paul was not. We find him at the stoning of St. Stephen, holding the cloaks of the men who murdered our patron Saint. From that bit of bloodletting, his passion was inflamed, and he made it his personal mission to stamp out this new Christian sect. He threatened,

imprisoned, tortured Christians in Jerusalem, and when he'd done his self appointed job well, he expanded his sights to Christians in Damascus as well. It was on the road to expand his persecutions that he encounters Jesus, and is literally, knocked from his high horse. It is interesting that when Jesus pleads with Ananais to overcome his fear of Paul and restore his sight, that he describes the purpose and the nature of St. Paul's conversion. "He is a vessel chosen by me to witness to the gentiles and to Kings." "I will show him what great things he must suffer for my sake."

Post conversion, St. Paul's life is a life of grace, peace, courage, longsuffering and charity. Where he once persecuted those who disagreed with him, he now developed a faith in the Holy Ghost. When the Jews will not hear and be baptized, he lets them go their way, saying that since they would not hear, he will bring the good news to the Gentiles. He lets the Holy Ghost determine who will heed that call, putting his ego aside, attentive only to his responsibilities. The man who inflicted pain, now leads a life of constant suffering. He is beaten, attacked by beasts, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned and finally murdered. His influence, once the product of threats, is now underpinned by prayerfulness. The soldiers on the ship carrying him to Rome, when it is ready to founder, turn to the prayerful man of God, and it is by St. Paul's intercession that the remaining prisoners are spared, and the whole ship's company delivered. Finally, he is a man of charity, organizing the relief effort from his churches to the church at Jerusalem as it faced a famine, and he offered that relief despite the fact that no good ever was shown him by the Church in Jerusalem.

His life is gracious, admirable, the very essence of heroic adventure. And yet, we still don't embrace him. We embrace St. Peter because he shares our rash and clumsy faith. We look to St. Anthony when we lose things, turn St. Joseph on his head to sell our houses, but we don't love St. Paul. The reason is because St. Paul does not abide the silliness of the Church, and because we too often consent and live that silliness in our own parishes. When don't like him, because we know his admonition is often fit for ourselves.

He modern Church seems to be the history of endless division, each succeeding division more the product of pride and intolerance than the last. When St.

Paul's churches started down that path, boasting in Baptism by Peter over Apollos or Apollos over Paul, it was St. Paul who ordered them to stop, reminding them there was only one Church, the Church instituted by Jesus Christ, and that they had no right to glory in their own pride. When the wealthy of one church made Communion the opportunity for lavish drunken feasts in front of those who were in need, he admonished them, reminding them that only meal fit for the Eucharist was what was the one provided by Jesus at the Last Supper. He opposed gossip and cliques wherever they emerged. When the leaders of one of his church's were notoriously and scandalously sinful, he ordered his congregations to put the sinners out, but also to be open to their return if they could become penitent, for he did not want to leave any sinner, even those who offended the Church, to the will of the devil. When a Church was blessed and had abundance, he reminded them their blessing was meant to be shared with those who had less. St. Paul addressed in his churches and in his lifetime the very same abuses that the church sadly still commits today, and even more sadly, that we allow to creep into St Stephen's. He reminds us that we must be vigilant, and humble and obedient, which does not endear him to us as much as we should allow.

St. Paul had a goad, a thorn in his side, which gave him pain for the entirety of his post conversion life. He didn't complain about beatings, stoning, imprisonment, even his impending martyrdom, but he did complain about that thorn. There times he asked Jesus to take it away, but Our Lord never did. He answered St. Paul that the goad kept him humble, reminded him of his own weakness, and the necessity of relying only of the strength of Jesus. The goad kept him humble, and Our Lord was glad to leave it as a reminder. In a way, St. Paul's teachings are a goad to us in the Church in this and every age. We don't like the effect, we might pretend we don't need it, even ask if we really have to be bothered by his preaching and writing and life at all. But he keeps us humble, he keeps us mindful of our weakness, and how easy it is for us to let down our community and our God. He is the thorn in our side that Jesus believes we need to keep us obedient, and he is content that we live and learn from St. Paul, not only when he makes us uneasy, but especially when he makes us uneasy.

***In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen***