

Reflections from the Holy Land as we journey in the year of St Paul

In the Acts of the Apostles we have three narratives on the conversion of St Paul. They form a kind of triangle featuring three key locations where he told and retold his story – Damascus; Jerusalem and Caesarea. In reading the three conversion stories we find in them the three missionary objectives of St Paul:

1. Universality of salvation – he had to continually struggle against the desire of those converts from Judaism as well as some of the Apostles to keep the saving mission of Jesus for the ‘chosen’ people of Israel.
2. To show the unity that Christ desired through his teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ with many parts but as one united whole.
3. To activate the whole community since all have charisms given by the Spirit to be used for the benefit of all.

In the first conversion narrative told by the writer of Acts in Acts 9:15 – we hear how Jesus speaks to the Prophet Ananias about the mission he has in mind for Paul. The church/ shrine in Damascus that marks and commemorates Paul’s first conversion story is designed like a tent to remember Paul’s own trade as a tent maker. We could also imagine that the tent could mean that the Lord wanted to include the gentiles in the people of God under the same tent. (Damascus is in Syria so it was not possible to visit this site at this time)

In Acts 22: 6-21 I would like to pick up two of the many points from the narrative. Firstly, unique to this version of the conversion story as narrated by Paul is the question he asks of Jesus in verse 10 of Acts 22. Paul asks “What shall I do Lord?” This question echoes the question of the followers of John the Baptist and the people who listened to St Peter after the resurrection who ask what they must do to be saved. For this set of Jewish listeners Paul is saying that he is doing the will of God in reaching out to the gentiles. We too can ask that question of the Lord for our own lives and for our communities.

Secondly, the context here is Paul who has been mobbed by the crowd in the Temple with accusations that he has been persuading Jews to abandon the law of Moses and follow ‘the way’. He is arrested by the Roman soldiers who are there keeping the peace and he asks them if he can speak to the people. He defends himself in Hebrew speaking directly to the Israelites. He tells of his conversion and how his mission is to preach to the Gentiles which does not go down well with the Jews listening. Perhaps in this year of St Paul we need to ask ourselves which groups of people we exclude and what it is we are doing that creates hostility and wrong perceptions regarding the following of Christ. In Jerusalem today there are SO many groups, movements, factions etc among the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims and those who want to have nothing to do with religion. The exclusive mentality persists between orthodox, conservative, progressive, reformed and so on and on in all traditions. The

call for unity is very hard to respond to and the challenge is truly to keep all the doors open for dialogue and peace building.

In Acts 26:12-18 Paul retells his conversion story but this time to King Agrippa who is himself a Jew but who works for the Roman occupying forces. Paul is on trial and defends himself in Caesarea by the sea before being sent on a ship to Rome to be heard by the Caesar.

In modern day Caesarea there is an extensive and very impressive excavated ruin which includes an amphitheatre, circus, Roman baths, offices, a palace, a harbour etc. This was the residence and administrative centre of the Roman procurator and occasional residence of the King who was Agrippa at the time. There is a raised section that could have been a court house in which there is a sign which suggests that this is could possible be the place where St Paul stood while defending himself. A few things struck me while standing in that spot and reflecting on this text:



Firstly, that after these two thousand years only the story and story teller remains - the truth has triumphed over time. The stones lie in ruins. The exceedingly luxurious lifestyle of the Romans and their consumption of massive quantities of fresh water needed for the baths, pools etc all lie in ruins from succeeding invasions, earthquakes and the rest.

Secondly, that the justice that the Romans handed out was very much limited to its own citizens. They were so tied up with their rules of law that even though they all knew Paul to be innocent they could not release him. Thirdly, that in the plan of God, even the terribly things that happened to Paul became a spring board for good. The journey to Rome, the two years that Paul spent in Rome all had their purpose and Paul, journeying in the love of God and listening carefully to the Spirit, made the Kingdom present wherever he went.

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