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St. Paul

By
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Archbishop of Baltimore



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"Watch ye, stand fast in the Faith, do manfully and be strengthened" (1 Cor. xvi. 13).

The Vision

IF the conversion of one sinner brings Joy to God's angels, what must have been the Joy of the heavenly Court on that day when Saul the Jew of Tarsus fell prone on the road leading to Damascus blinded by the bright light which shone upon him, stunned by a voice divine asking a reason for his bitter persecution of the followers of the Nazarene? "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me." Saul answered, "Who art Thou, Lord?" There came to him the reply, "I am Jesus Whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the goad." In that moment Saul knew Jesus as never before. Grace came with the call to conversion. Saul expressed his willingness to comply with the will of Christ. "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?"

¹Preached in the Church of the Paulist Fathers in West 59th Street, New York City, January 31, 1926.

The Vessel of Election

In a few days the city of Damascus housed one who was set apart by Jesus Christ as a "Vessel of election," to carry Christ's name and teaching before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For thirty-five years that convert Jew labored in the work of spreading Christianity with a passionate zeal that knew no bounds. His figure as a Christian herald loomed larger year by year. His name was known from Jerusalem to Rome and into distant Spain as a divinely selected bearer of the message of Christ to the Gentiles. Greeks and Romans, Syrians and Macedonians, scholars of Athens, the poor of Corinth, the bitter pagan merchants of Ephesus, Jews wherever found, talked of Paul the fearless "Protagonist" of Christ, the restless voyageur, the good soldier of Jesus of Nazareth. Nineteen hundred years have come and gone since the convert Jew preached Christ in Cyprus, in Antioch of Asia, to the Galatians and to the Macedonians in response to their

cry for help. The cities where he worked, prayed and suffered have many of them disappeared. Yet the figure of the man of God is more colossal than ever in the world of Christianity. After the God made Man Himself, this Jew of Tarsus is recognized as the greatest teacher of Christianity, a transformer as it were of the Savior's doctrines for the people of the earth, an interpreter of Christ to all mankind. We are assembled here tonight to celebrate his conversion to the faith, to thank God for this Christian teacher of the nations, to draw lessons for our own living from his life.

Origin and Education

It may not be amiss to say a few words about the early education and environment of this great Christian hero. He was born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, "no mean city" as he calls it. He was a Jew of the "stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as touching the

Law a Pharisee." No Jewish child ever received a sterner training in the Law and prophets than this young Jew of Tarsus. He coned with a fiery zeal the books of the Old Testament so that he came to be recognized as an authority even in his tender youth. When about fourteen years of age he was sent to Jerusalem, the fountain head of Hebrew lore, to study under the guidance of a then famous Rabbi, Gamaliel. He grew up an ardent lover of his race, a love he never lost. Before his vision rose up a figure of a Messiah to come to restore the lost glory and independence of his people. He himself was looked on by them as a providential man, one of character and erudition who might well become their leader. As a youth he had heard of the wonder worker who appeared in the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea. He had been told of His miracles and teaching and of his death as a public malefactor. The mind of the young man of Tarsus and Palestine had been warped into a groove of hatred and contempt for one whose

death had been brought about by his own people calling down His blood on their own and their children's head. Paul's learning in the Law did not save him from the prejudices of the Palestinian Jews.

The Persecutor

When Stephen the first martyr was stoned to death the young scholar from the Academy of Gamaliel was there to take part in and gloat over the stoning. He held the coats of the murderers of Stephen. He had a passion for the glories of Judaism. Its bright hopes must not be dispelled by the transient reputation of any pretender. He himself would herd together the foolish followers of the Nazarene wherever he could find them and carry them back in chains to Jerusalem, there to see them meet the fate of the first martyr. He is on his way to Damascus on such a mission breathing hatred against Christ. Thus up to his thirty-fourth year the Jew of Tarsus, the recognized scholar

of Jerusalem, Saul, better known as Paul, is a Jew to the very marrow. He would hear nothing of Christ. His good sense saved him from the stupidity of a denial of His existence. He feared the growing influence of the Savior's teaching. To destroy it he would kill those who accepted and practiced it.

Nearing Damascus, that same city partly destroyed recently by the order of a French hater of Christianity, a dazzling light shone on Paul and his escort. Jesus Christ appeared to him and plaintively asked him why he was persecuting Him in the person of His followers? That event, Paul's conversion, marks a turning point in the world's story. He himself described it many times in after years as a calm undisturbed narrator of facts. That was the crisis in the whole life of the learned Jew of Tarsus. Opponents of the Gospel of Christ have made desperate attempts to deny, to explain it away. The fearless, manly, independent Paul they would fain depict as a visionary, a hysterical helpless dreamer. Jesus Christ

called him, for in His own divine providence He had marked him out as a vessel of election to carry His name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. The time at my disposal does not permit me to sketch in detail the evangelistic labors of Paul.

The Preacher

With a zeal for the cause and teachings of Jesus Christ surpassing that hitherto displayed in his work for the furtherance of the principles and teaching of Judaism he set out on his mission. From Antioch in Syria to Antioch in Asia he journeyed, evangelizing Cyprus on his way. He carried the name and heavenly doctrines of Jesus through Galatia, Pisidia and Phrygia, through Lydia and Mysia, all through that land where the Turks hold sway today. He crossed and recrossed the Ægean Sea to Macedonia and Greece. Wherever he went he established Churches. God worked through him in marvelous ways. He met much bitter

opposition born of hatred for the gentle Nazarene from his own Jews who were to be found as even today in the great commercial cities and ports of the Roman Empire. No man before or since ever gave finer proof of courage than did St. Paul. Perils by land and sea, from friends and foes, by day and night were his. Scourgings, imprisonments, banishments, nothing could daunt him. Death he did not fear. He showed himself master of every situation. With an indomitable will, a clear vision of his mission, an activity that was nothing less than marvelous in view of bodily ailments, a boundless patience, a fearlessness that recognized no obstacle, an independence of character that emphasized his unselfishness, he carried on his work of preaching Christ to Jew and Gentile with a success that made paganism rock to its very foundations. He faced with placidity of soul the violent Jewish leaders. He spoke with persuasive calmness from the steps of the Castle of Antonia to his would-be Jewish lynchers in the city of Jeru-

salem. He showed not a trace of fear when brought before Felix, Festus and Agrippa. He never lost an opportunity to interpret Jesus Christ and His teaching to rich and poor, rulers and subjects. He became preëminently the Christian teacher of the Nations. His natural gifts made him a ruler of men. He carried into his Christian work all the exquisite qualities he had developed as a devout student and adherent of Judaism. Not one of them was lost or left inoperative.

The Gentle Friend

You might gather from what I have said that he must have been cold, distant and forbidding in character. The opposite is true. Of him it could be said that nothing human was without interest to him. He knew human nature better perhaps than any man of his day. He knew his own potentiality to sin and moral degradation if deprived of God's grace. He speaks of that weakness constantly. To read him

one would imagine he was the greatest of sinners. He places himself amongst "the children of wrath." He speaks of himself as "carnal sold under sin." When the Lycaonians in their enthusiasm wished to worship him, his answer to them was, "Ye men, why do you do these things. We also are mortals like unto you." His tender affection for all mankind was such that he seemed to forget his lofty position as an Apostle and wonder-worker of Christ and identified himself with the lowliest of those to whom he preached. "God had made all mankind of one." "As in Adam all die, so in Christ we shall be made alive."

His Love for the Jews

No Jew ever loved his people as did Paul. Amid all his consolations, graces and visions, despite his consuming love for and joy in Jesus Christ, and in his newly made Christians "his joy and crown," his tender heart bled for his own Hebrew people. "I lie not, my conscience bearing me witness in the

Holy Ghost that I have great sadness and continual sorrow in my heart." "Lord," he cried out, "they know that I cast into prison and beat in every synagogue them that believed in Thee. And when the blood of Stephen Thy witness was shed, I stood by and consented and kept the garments of them that killed him." Yet his own would not hear him. With a sadness that is truly poignant he tells us. "I wished myself to be an anathema from Christ for my brethren who are my kinsmen according to the flesh." Yet notwithstanding his own sufferings at their hands and their hardness of heart he would not say that they were hopeless. "Hath God cast away His people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite of the seed of Abraham, of the Tribe of Benjamin." "Blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles shall come in; and so all Israel shall be saved." Far from being harsh or repellent the great Doctor of the Gentiles was all things to all men that he might save all. To the Jews a

Jew; to the Gentiles one of them; to the weak he was weak. He had the fullest sympathy with poor human nature. He was a great universal teacher because in his love for Jesus Christ he embraced all men. His great heart absorbed as it was in love of God yearned for human sympathy and support.

The Beloved Pastor

No preacher of the Gospel ever won as he did the ardent love of his converts. When he left them at the end of his third missionary journey to go to Jerusalem, from which he was to be sent as a prisoner to Cæsar's Tribunal in Rome, they fell upon his neck and wept bitterly. Paul's heart, stout though it was, was well nigh breaking. "What mean ye," he cried, "weeping and afflicting my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." His affection for Timothy was intense. The latter's coming to him brought him peace and joy. Intimately

united to God, he nevertheless longed to be with his friends. "I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ; a thing by far the better, but to abide in the flesh is needful to you."

Here before us then stands Christianity's great athlete, its profoundest teacher, its most fearless protagonist, its indefatigable defender, its most illuminating exponent, knowing no obstacles, dreading no danger, ever up and doing in ceaseless activity in the cause of Christ, an inspired voice driven ever onward to new fields and new peoples to be cultivated and gained for Him Who had called Paul into His service on the road to Damascus.

The Man of Courage

Behold this great strong man a lover of his kind with unlimited human sympathies knowing human weakness yet loving man, kind, tender, affectionate, humble, approachable, yet independent, ever afraid of being a burden to his converts. He dignified labor with his

own hands. Wherever he went he gained his own livelihood as a tent maker. He would have no man say that he owed him anything even though he recognized his right as a preacher of the Gospel to live by the Gospel. The world never knew a greater human figure than the Apostle Paul. After the Son of God made man and Mary His Blessed Mother, the one time Jew of Tarsus holds the first place in the esteem and affections of all lovers of Christianity.

Meeting Death

Jewish hatred failing in its attempt to lynch him in the city where his student days were passed was the occasion of his appealing, as he had the right to do as a Roman citizen, to Cæsar in Rome. To Rome he went. Acquitted once he was carried back to the pagan city again. Romans heard his fervent words, Romans yielded to the charm of his inspired eloquence. The first Christians of the Catacombs had their hearts warmed as he spoke of Christ the Good

Shepherd. And then he died, beheaded a martyr for the Christ in Whom and for Whom he lived and labored every moment of his life since the hour of the vision on the desert road leading to Damascus.

Dead! No not dead. Still a great living throbbing energizing power in Christianity. Still the passionate lover of Jesus Christ; still the inspired teacher of nations; still a magnetic voice calling to the Jews scattered throughout the world to come to Christ; still the interpreter of divine teaching to the Gentiles.

Model for Men

In what I have already said I have given but few high points in the life and character of the most lovable of saints. To do otherwise in the brief time of a single discourse would be impossible. A vast Pauline literature has grown up through the centuries. This lonely lover of Christ traversed many seas and lands in his Apostolic labors. He became a spokesman of the Divine

teacher for all men of all time. After the life of Christ and of His Immaculate Mother, I know of no other life that is so fascinating, so truly thrilling in a Christian sense as that of St. Paul. I recommend the perusal of that life to every man and particularly to every Catholic.

To bring this very imperfect sketch of his life to a close may we not ask what lessons does that life teach us? In it are lessons for all of us. For priest and prelate, those of burning zeal for the cause of Christ, fearlessness in the preaching of Catholic doctrine, no compromising but ever courageous loyalty to eternal Truth, readiness to suffer, to make sacrifices, to die if necessary in the work of spreading truth and saving souls, a willingness to be all things to all men in order to bring all men to Christ. The priest in a great metropolis, the lonely missionary in some far-off unfavored land can find courage and stimulating strength in the contemplation of the life and work of the great convert Jew of Tarsus.

Model of Valor

But for you of the Laity where are the lessons? The basic secret of St. Paul's fervor and indefatigable zeal was his intense personal love of Jesus Christ. "The love of Christ presseth us." "God forbid that I should glory in anything but in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." "I desire to be dissolved and be with Christ." "What shall separate me from the love of Christ?" His own answer is—nothing shall. This passionate love for and adherence to Christ shines out in every line of the life of St. Paul as a convert. If you, dearly Beloved, desire to live in accordance with the law of Christ, you must cultivate a great personal love and attachment for Christ. This love which must rest on a knowledge of the life and love of the God made man will be our great, and I may add, our only source of consolation in life's many trials. It will vitalize our faith and make its practice a great spiritual force as we journey onward facing temptations and

difficulties. It will give us some of that courage which so marked the whole Christian life of St. Paul. Today, more perhaps than ever, this moral courage is needed. Despite our civilization, our marvelous scientific progress, our ever advancing educational efforts, our possession of great material wealth and comforts, I am afraid that we shall find in our society much of the moral putridity that flaunted itself publicly in the face of Paul as he announced Christ to the inhabitants of Ephesus, Philippi, Athens and Rome. The paganism of divorce, of child murder, of sinful pleasures, of godless education, of the deification of wealth is rampant. It calls for courage in the followers of Jesus Christ to keep themselves aloof from such evils of our day and to follow closely their Divine Master, as courage was called for in the converts of Ephesus to be Christians whilst the pagan cry of "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" was ringing constantly in their ears.

Model of Loyalty

In the Apostle of the Gentiles there was no trimming, no compromising. With him it was yea, yea, and nay, nay. He cared not for pagan likes and dislikes. He cared not for their bitterness and prejudices. He preached Jesus Christ crucified and risen with a frankness and straightforwardness rendered necessary today. In our American population of one hundred and ten million people, we have sixty millions who make no public acknowledgment of Christ's divine sovereignty by any form of public worship. We have thirty million divided into a hundred different sects. We of the Church of Christ need to be frank and outspoken in the expression of our Faith. It takes courage and real manliness to practice it, making it the guiding light of, and a real strong elevating force in our lives. We need a well instructed, and interested laity ready to make sacrifices for Christ in the upbuilding of His Church in this fair land, in the support of Cath-

olic education and in the defence of Catholic rights which must be preserved at the price of eternal vigilance.

The enemies of the Apostle of the Gentiles and his teaching called the rulers of his day to their aid and invoked law in their efforts to suppress his work for Christ. Just as today we find the haters of Catholicism doing in more than one State of the Union. This courage in the practice and in the interest of our Faith is much needed in our laity. There is no place for broad-mindedness or liberal views when dealing with the mathematical truth that two and two make four. The teachings of Christ and His Church are truer than the truths of mathematics. So-called broadmindedness with regard to such teaching is but another name for weakness or a readiness to compromise. No man has a right to whittle away for any reason whatsoever any teaching of Jesus Christ. St. Paul spoke "boldly." A little more of that boldness born of conviction of the divine truths we hold is very desirable in this age of indif-

ference. There are many other lessons to be learned from a study of the life of this ardent lover of Christ. Let us conclude: St. Paul was every inch a man. He was no weakling. He was willing to be a slave to Christ his God. Yet he was independent, loved work and preached its dignity. He feared God, but neither man nor devil. The religion of Christ taught in its fulness by the Catholic Church is not a religion suited to women and children only; it is essentially a religion that calls for manliness. It calls for strength, determination, pluck. It demands self-mastery, sacrifice, renunciation of many things that are attractive to our weak nature.

We have thousands of examples of all those qualities in the recognized heroes of our Faith. After Jesus Christ Himself, there is no more magnetic figure in Christian annals than St. Paul. There are saints whose whole lives were led in an atmosphere of profound spirituality and whose example would seem to lie out of the reach of ordinary

mortals. The Apostle of the Gentiles was ever one of us. Close to Christ, he remained in close contact with men. Strange though it may seem to say it, there is no life more profoundly saintly and yet so attractively human at the same time.

Let us ask him to inspire us with a great love of our divine Savior Jesus Christ, an ever deeper interest in our religion and its practice, so that we too may continue courageously watching, standing fast in the Faith, doing manfully and gathering strength.

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