

22.01. 23 Views from the Pews The Conversion of St Paul

Next Tuesday, 25 January, the Liturgy is set to celebrate the Conversion of St Paul. We read of how Saul, a devout and righteous Jew, outraged by the distortion of the traditional faith of Judaism presented by Jesus and his followers, tried to stamp out this new heresy and pursue its adherents to death. Acts 8:3 describes how Saul was ravaging the Jerusalem church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, then committing them to prison.

Still breathing fire and threats, Saul extended his angry campaign to communities further north. Disciples living as far off as Damascus (218 km away!), already knew of how much evil Saul had done to the saints in Jerusalem. When they heard that Saul was on his way with a commission from the chief priests to search for “any who belonged to the Way, men or women, [that] he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9: 2), the church in Damascus must have been praying for strength to resist him. They could never have expected such a decisive answer to their prayers.

Saul’s sudden collapse onto the roadway might in modern terms be described by a massive stroke, except that it was accompanied by a voice which his companions could also hear. The instant blindness also speaks of a catastrophic shock to the brain – as surely might be expected of anyone pitched into an unexpected, terrifying close encounter with God. Saul spent the next three days sightless, fasting, and struggling to comprehend what had happened.

Whereas many miracle stories stretch the credulity of the modern reader, this one rings remarkably true. It is a fact, confirmed by many modern case records, that a person exposed to an overwhelming, traumatic experience can indeed suffer temporary loss of sight for no physical reason. Removal of the trauma can reverse it quickly. So when brave Ananias, fearful but obedient to God’s direct command, assured Saul of Jesus’ compassion, understanding and forgiveness, Saul found that “something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored” (Acts 9: 17).

The scriptural account of Saul’s experience has a fully understandable rational explanation in terms of known brain trauma, with confirmed modern parallels. Such events are often followed by a radical change in behaviour or world view. Saul’s experience lives on today as the standard example of a “paradigm shift”.

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