

Our set reading for today comes from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9.

*Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light out of heaven shone around him. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. And he said, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?'*<sup>1</sup>

You probably noticed that our reading contains no less than three questions. One asked by our Lord, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' and two by Saul, 'Who are you, Lord?' and 'Lord, what do you want me to do?'

This coming Tuesday, God willing, I shall be speaking here at Ladies Hour. When speaking there almost three years ago, I referred to an incident told by the then Mayor of Kansas City in the United States. As Mayor Cleaver tells the story, he and his wife flew to San Francisco for a three-day trip and rented a car to visit friends in a suburb of the city. Mayor Cleaver, like most men, always bragged about his sense of direction. The drive to Daly City was supposed to take *fifteen* minutes. After *thirty* minutes, Mrs. Cleaver turned to her husband and said, cautiously, 'Honey, I think we're on the wrong freeway'. Mr. Cleaver replied, 'We are *not!* I know where I'm going'. He continued on and on until he saw a road sign which read, 'San Jose, 35 miles'. By then, Mrs. Cleaver was biting her lip on the far edge of the passenger side. Mr. Cleaver knew he was wrong, but, *being a man*, was not going to admit it. He kept driving on, until suddenly, out of the blue, he saw it – what in telling the story he described as 'the most beautiful, the most gorgeous sign he had seen in years' – in big, bold, black letters, a road sign announcing 'U-turns Are Permitted'!

But I can tell you that, if Mayor Cleaver was thankful that he was permitted to do a U-turn on that road to San Jose, he was not half as thankful as was Saul of Tarsus that he was allowed to do a spiritual U-turn on the road to Damascus!

But what do we know of the past life of this 'Saul of Tarsus'? Frankly, not a great deal. We know that Saul owed three things to his father: first, his status as a Roman citizen, which came in very useful on more than one occasion after he became a Christian;<sup>2</sup> second, his status as a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin<sup>3</sup> – indeed it is likely that Saul's parents graced him with his name on account of probably the most illustrious member of that tribe, who had lived over 1,000 years before – namely Saul, the first king of Israel.<sup>4</sup> And thirdly, Saul benefited from his father's example, which encouraged Saul to follow in his footsteps as a Pharisee.<sup>5</sup>

We know little else of Saul's family, other than that he had at least one sister, whose son was used by God almost 35 years later<sup>6</sup> to save Saul – known to us then better as Paul – from a plot to have him killed.<sup>7</sup>

Saul spent the early years of his life in the city of Tarsus, which he later claimed, correctly, to be 'no mean city'.<sup>8</sup> For Tarsus was a centre of great learning, and it is more than likely there that Saul became acquainted with the works of many of the great Greek writers – quotations from which surface both in his later preaching and in his epistles.<sup>9</sup>

But, as a young man, Saul had been sent to Jerusalem, the heart and centre of the Jewish faith – to study 'at the feet' (as the expression is) of one Rabban Gamaliel – 'Rabban' being a more honourable title than 'Rabbi' – Rabban Gamaliel being the most respected Pharisee of his day.<sup>10</sup> It was there no doubt that Saul had acquired much of his in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament and of the Jewish faith. 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation', he later wrote, 'being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers'.<sup>11</sup>

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, has earlier introduced Rabban Gamaliel as being a somewhat open-minded and tolerant individual.<sup>12</sup> But his pupil Saul was *anything but* tolerant.

Saul was characterised rather by fierce and persecuting zeal. And very early on, believing Jesus to be an impostor and a blasphemer, he devoted his every energy to destroying the Christian church, particularly at Jerusalem. 'As for Saul', Luke wrote a little earlier, 'he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison'.<sup>13</sup>

Paul himself later reported, 'when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them ... and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them *even to foreign cities*'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it had been at Saul's feet that the murderers of the first known Christian martyr had laid their outer clothes when stoning Stephen to death.

But, not content with doing his utmost to stamp out all traces of the Christian faith from Jerusalem, Saul 'persecuted', as he said, the disciples of Jesus 'even to foreign cities'. As part of this crusade he sought and

obtained the necessary authorisation from the High Priest, and, as he expressed it later, 'went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished'.<sup>15</sup> It was as part of this crusade that he sought, and obtained, the necessary authorisation from the High Priest, and, as he expressed it later, 'went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished'.<sup>16</sup>

But the man who approached the city of Damascus that day with burning hatred in his heart, intending to arrest every follower of Christ he could trace, was himself arrested by the Living Lord, who, in spite of Saul's attitude and ambition, had nothing but love in His heart for him. I say 'arrested by the Living Lord' deliberately, because, in one of his letters, Paul later spoke of this very occasion as the time when 'Christ Jesus ... laid hold of me' – when the Lord Jesus 'apprehended (arrested) me'.<sup>17</sup>

I said earlier that Saul was thankful the Lord allowed him to do a spiritual U-turn on the road to Damascus! And indeed he was. Listen to what he wrote towards the close of his life, 'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me ... putting me into His service, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent, insolent man ... the grace (the unmerited favour) of our Lord superabounded ... This is a faithful saying and worthy of universal acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief (of whom I am the foremost).'<sup>18</sup>

Saul's conversion – or Paul's conversion, if you prefer – was, of course, altogether unique. It was indeed this very encounter with the Risen Lord which qualified Paul to be an apostle.<sup>19</sup> And from his day to ours there have been few conversions anywhere near as dramatic. And yet, as Paul himself said of that occasion, 'I obtained mercy, in order that in me, as the foremost (sinner), Jesus Christ might display the full extent of His longsuffering for a pattern of those who later receive eternal life through believing in Him'.<sup>20</sup> So it is that, in the light of Paul's conversion, no one can argue that his or her sin is too great for God to forgive.

Let me tell you of a man who thirty years ago proved just that. Jacob Koshy grew up in Singapore with one driving ambition: to be a success in life, to gain all the money and possessions he could. That led him into the world of drugs and gambling, and eventually he became the lord of an international smuggling network. In 1980, he was arrested and placed in a government drug rehabilitation prison in Singapore.

All Jacob's goals, dreams, and ambitions were locked up with him in a tiny cell, and his heart was full of a cold emptiness.

He was a smoker, and cigarettes weren't allowed in the centre. So he had tobacco smuggled in, which he rolled in the pages of a Gideon Bible. One day he fell asleep while smoking. He awoke to find the cigarette had burned out, and that all that remained was a scrap of charred paper. Jacob unrolled it and read what was written: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

He asked for another Bible and read the full story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Jacob suddenly realized that if God could help someone like Saul, God could help him too. There in his cell he knelt and prayed, asking the Lord Jesus to come into his life and change him ... which He did. Jacob started sharing his story with the other prisoners, and as soon as he was released he became involved in a local church. He met a Christian lady, married, and is now a missionary in the Far East where he is still telling people, 'Who would have believed that I could find the truth as a result of smoking the Word of God?'<sup>21</sup>

Another case, I guess, of a unique conversion.

But the big question for us is not *how*, *when* or *where* one became a Christian ... but whether or not one *has* become one. And the only way for anyone to do that – whether Saul of Tarsus, Jacob Koshy or someone sitting here today – is to acknowledge their need and to rest their faith in the Jesus who died for sins and who has been raised from the dead.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul's question 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' comes from his own testimony to the Jews of Jerusalem, Acts 22. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 16. 37-39; 22. 25-29.

<sup>3</sup> Phil. 3. 5.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam. 10. 21-24.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 23. 6. The Pharisees being the strictest of the Jewish sects, Acts 26. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Paul's conversion is probably to be dated at 33 A.D. – some three years after our Lord's crucifixion – and his arrest at Jerusalem to 57 A.D. (See F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 55-56).

<sup>7</sup> Acts 23. 12-24.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 21. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Aratus and Cleanthes, Acts 17. 28; Menander, a famous Epicurean writer, 1 Cor. 15. 33; and Epimenides the Cretan, Tit. 1, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Rabban Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel, one of the most important figures in Jewish history.

<sup>11</sup> Gal. 1. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 5. 34-39.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 8. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 26. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 22. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 22. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Phil. 3. 12.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Tim. 1. 12-15.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor. 9. 1; 15. 8.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Tim. 1. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, S. 148. Quoted from *"From Smoking the Word to Speaking the Word" in Gideon Testimonies from International Extension Countries (Nashville: The Gideons International, 1994), 59-60.*