

The Conversion of Paul

Evensong readings:-

Isaiah ch.49, vv1-13

Acts ch.22, vv3-16

by

Didymus

I have taken the opportunity to have a closer look at this remarkable man and his history and faith. I have included some pictures which show the artists' interpretation of Paul at various ages in his life.

**PAUL**, by Didymus

The Apostle Paul has an unique place in the Christian church, partly from the reference to him in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and partly due to the letters included in the New Testament. Whereas the Disciples were faced with Jesus and asked to follow him, Paul was an adversary who was turned in a moment to become his Apostle, to the Gentiles.

We know little about the Disciples after the Ascension other than Peter, but we know far more about Paul and the churches that he founded, and the miracles that he achieved. It is an almost childish irony that while we have his letters, we don't know what they are replying to and teaching.

So let us look at Paul and what we know about him. I have compiled a timeline from various sources, set out at the end. Obviously some of the dates are approximate and some are unknown, but I have taken a half-educated guess. He was born in Tarsus in Asia Minor, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, the son of a Pharisee. His father worked for the occupying Roman power and was given the rank of Roman citizen. Paul inherited his father's Roman citizenship, and he in turn became a Pharisee. His Hebrew name was Saul, Paul in Latin which meant "little". Described by Onesiphorus, a second century writer, he was small, bow legged with a bald head, meeting eyebrows, and a large red hooked nose. Hardly kind, and also hardly semitic.



Bartolomeu Montegna.

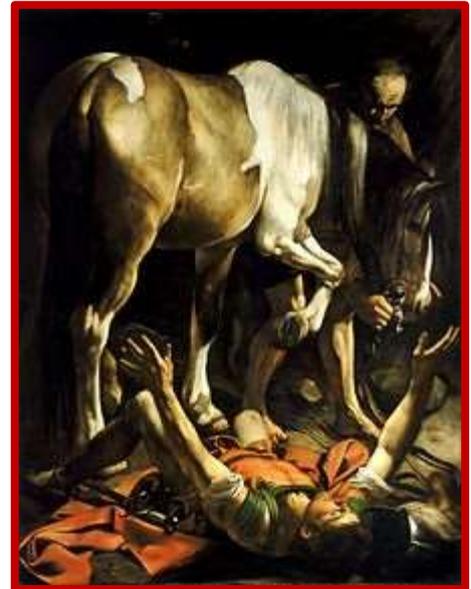
Little is known about his early life in the Greco-Roman culture of Tarsus, but after schooling in Tarsus he was sent to Jerusalem to study the Torah under a priest, Gamaliel, who was a member of the Sanhedrin and a senior tutor. It suggests that Paul was an able student, or his family was not without influence. Obviously it is impossible to give exact dates but Paul's move to Jerusalem would have occurred when he was in his mid-teens. It is significant that his studies should come at an age where he would have been impressionable and open to radicalisation, as it were.



It is difficult to piece his life together here, for he was trained as a tentmaker, and during and after his studies, he became a Pharisee and a fanatical opponent of Jesus and his teaching. He was said to have stayed with his sister in Jerusalem, but no doubt travelled between his home and Jerusalem during that time. Although he appears to have been in Jerusalem during the Passion of Jesus, no mention in the Gospel and Acts, or the letters suggests it. Paul surely had never encountered Jesus, otherwise he would have said so, especially after his conversion.

Paul's activities might well have been as an informer, seeking out Christians and denouncing them, rather like the Stasi in East Germany post WW2 or apartheid in South Africa. In about 34 - 35AD Paul had approval from the high priest to go to Damascus to find Christians, and during his journey, he was stopped and converted.

Paul's conversion was an amazing miracle, almost impossible to explain to people. Certainly being thrown to the ground and blinded without warning would frighten anyone. He was sheltered and cared for as Acts Ch.9 relates, and baptised. To stop a fanatically driven young man in his tracks and to achieve obedience was an astonishing demonstration of God's power, so astonishing that we really need to think deeply and use our imaginations. For what God, as Jesus Christ, achieved was to harness Paul's energy and skill, to create infant churches in heathen land, sustain them, and ultimately give his life for Jesus. Paul, who spoke Hebrew, Greek and Latin and coming from a Hellenised Jewish background, was the perfect instrument for God's work. In creating and sustaining infant churches, Paul received word from them and replied in writings –letters – which have survived two millennia for us to read today.



Caravaggio

Paul's Pharisaic training led to a style of writing – and no doubt preaching – which was frankly, wearing and long winded. I dread to think how many sermons on Paul's letters I have survived in sixty years. There is simply no point in trying to present the collection of Paul's letters as riveting, because *en masse* they are not. Even the author of Peter's second pastoral letter, in Ch.3, v16, touches on the subject: ***As also in all his (Paul's) epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, to their own destruction.***

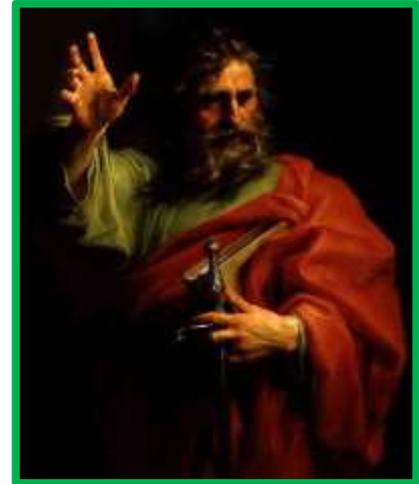
There is no point in saying otherwise. However, they have within them passages of great importance to our faith. The care and love of Paul shines through his words. They are as the miner's unpromising seams of rock, within which lay jewels beyond value.

The first letter to the Corinthians contains both the famous chapter 13 on love, and the chapter 15 in which Paul wields the sharp blade of logic. In his wordy but important letter to the Ephesians (Ch.6), Paul urges Christians **that the Lord will take his zeal as his whole armour, and will arm all creation to repel his enemies; he will put on righteousness as a breast plate, and wear impartial justice as a helmet.**

The translation used is critical, and I recommend the Good News translation, which is not so poetic but clearer and shorter. The letters tend to be repetitive as a group, for the obvious reason that the infant churches suffered similar problems and needed to have their attention refocused constantly. The letter to the Romans is different, for it is in effect a treatise on Christianity, a summary of our beliefs.

Paul's Timeline

- BC 4 Birth of Jesus Christ
- AD 6-8 Paul's birth at Tarsus, Asia Minor.
- 20-30 Teaching by Gamaliel
- 27 John the Baptist commences baptising
- 28-29 Jesus' ministry starts
- 30-34 Persecuted Christians in Jerusalem
- 30 or 33 Jesus' Crucifixion
- 34-36 Conversion of Paul, followed by baptism and a three year period in Arabia.
- 39 Visit Jerusalem and return to Tarsus, journey to Syria and Cilicia.
- 44 Assisted Barnabas at Antioch.
- 46-49 **First Journey:** Antioch Seleucia, Salamis Paphos (Cyprus) Attalia Perga* Pisidia Iconium Lystra Derbe, back to Perga (Turkey) and to Antioch.
(With Barnabas and John Mark: John Mark was sent home).
- 50-52 **Second Journey:** Antioch, Derbe Lystra Antioch in Pisidia Troas (Turkey) Neapolis Phillippi Amphipolis Beroea Athens Corinth (Stayed in Corinth) Chenchreae (Greece) and back to Caesarea.
Accompanied by Silvanus to Beroea and from Corinth, then Luke from Troas, who then remained in Phillippi.
- 51 1st Letter to the Thessalonians [Thessalonica was in Macedonia]
- 52 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul's authorship in doubt.
- 52 Return to Antioch
- 53-58 **Third Journey:** Antioch Ephesus (Stayed in Ephesus) Troas Phillippi Achaia (Corinth) back to Assos nr Troas (Turkey) Myteline Miletus Patara Tyre Ptolemais Caesarea and Jerusalem.
- 53 Letter to the Galatians
- 54 1st Letter to the Corinthians



- 56 2nd Letter to the Corinthians
- 54-58 Letter to the Philippians (The letter is thought to be written in three stages: A&B 54-57, letter C 57-58)
- 57 Letter to the Romans
- 58 Return from the Third journey
- 60 Arrested in Jerusalem. Held at Caesarea
- 62 Held under house arrest in Caesarea or Rome
- Letter to the Ephesians (Not thought to be written by Paul)
- Letter to the Colossians (Prob not written by Paul. Timothy? Written in 70-80.)
- Letter to the Philippians (alternate date)
- 61-63 Letter to the Philemon (But could be 56-57 at Ephesus)
- 1st Letter to Timothy (written for Paul)
- 2nd Letter to Timothy (written for Paul)
- Letter to Titus (written for Paul)
- 64-65 Travelled to Spain
- 66-67 Rearrested and beheaded
- 67-68 Letter to the Hebrews, **not** written by Paul

Several times during his journeys, Paul was the subject of miracles, often where his preaching had upset local interests or people. But he knew that. Ananias, who had been sent to end his blindness, had been told ***“Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*** He did.

The fourteen Pauline letters form a large part of the New Testament canon (the collection of agreed books), and while we know something of the history of books in the Bible, the provenance of Paul’s letters may be less clear as noted above. When the Book of the Acts of the Apostles became more widely known, it was realised that the letters kept by the church communities were important, and they were gradually collated into a collection, known as the Pauline Corpus. Scholars studying the letters separated the letters that were clearly written by Paul from those which were written on his behalf. Even now there is some general agreement on the authorship, but far from complete. When the canon of the NT was eventually agreed, the letters of the Pauline Corpus were included. The letters thought not to have been written by Paul were included on the basis that they were inspired in the same way, through the Holy Spirit.

So there it is. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, his history and his deeds. He, to a lesser extent Peter, and his fellow disciples, led the Christian church and created churches which grew and influenced the world for good. We give thanks for him, and his legacy, inspired and driven by a man who was in his turn inspired and driven by Jesus Christ. AMEN



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn

