

## Sunday 25th January 2009: The Conversion of St. Paul – Robert Innes

It has been an historic week. And I wonder where *you* were at 6:00p.m. on Tuesday evening? Were you, one of the millions of people across the world glued to their television screens to see the swearing in of a new American President? It was a deeply impressive occasion, with thousands upon thousands of Americans thronging the streets around Capitol Hill, in freezing temperatures, to welcome and applaud their new leader. Of course, For America this was a hugely significant event. As Barak Obama himself observed, who would have imagined that a black man might be inaugurated as President in a city where, only 60 years ago, he would have struggled to get a job as a waiter in a bar?

But the election of a new American President has huge significance not just for the United States but for the whole world. A President who grew up in Indonesia and Hawii with roots in a village in Kenya offers the possibility of an engaged outward-looking foreign policy that may, we hope, bring a new and creative approach to world issues, to relationships with the Muslim world, to the problems of the continent of Africa. Central to Obama's campaign has been the theme of *change*. The web-site is [www.change.gov](http://www.change.gov) and the T-shirts proclaim "change you can believe in". And for me, European and politically cynical as I am, this election thrilled me: and I, for one looked out on the world with a new sense that change is possible and that there is real hope.

How timely then that the readings set for today invite us to consider another moment in history that witnessed to the possibility of real change: the conversion of St. Paul. The effect of Paul's life and work was to open the faith of Israel to the world. He was the apostle to the Gentiles. It was Paul who planted and built up churches, all around the Mediterranean world, dedicated to following Israel's messiah. It was Paul, more than anyone else apart from Jesus himself, who sowed the seeds of two thousand years of Christian history. So let's spend a few minutes thinking about St. Paul, and the remarkable turn around in his life that happened on the Damascus Road.

Saul was an international, cosmopolitan figure: a Roman citizen, with an excellent command of Greek language and a strong Jewish community heritage. And he was passionate about his Judaism! He studied under the renowned Rabbi, Gamaliel; he was a Pharisee marked out by his devotion to the Jewish law. In the reading from Galatians we heard how he saw himself as "advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of his own age". Moreover he was "extremely zealous for the tradition of his fathers." Ah, oh dear. Religious zeal, we know, can be a dangerous thing. If you look in the book of Numbers you can find an account of the priest Phinehas, whose reputation for zeal led him unhesitatingly to put a spear through the body of a Jewish man and his Mideonite wife. Saul continued that tradition persecuting and indeed murdering those followers of Jesus who appeared to be breaking Jewish law. "I persecuted the church of God", says Paul, "and tried to destroy it".

Yet it was in the midst of his persecutory activity that Paul was converted. He had actually gone on a journey to Damascus with the intention of rounding up the Christians for extradition and trial in Jerusalem. We are probably in the year AD 32, about two years after Jesus was crucified. There are three accounts of his conversion in the New Testament. There are a few minor differences between them, but the central dialogue is identical. It is clear that on that hot middle eastern road, Paul

believed he heard Jesus Christ risen from the dead, speaking to him “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Paul’s whole work had been based on the presumption that Jesus had been rightly killed. Christ had acted as an ‘outlaw’. And ‘cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’. Now instead of seeing Jesus as cursed, he realises that Jesus was bearing the curse for others. Jesus is *for* the outsider. Therefore Paul must go precisely to the outsider, to those outside the law, to the Gentiles.

Importantly, Paul doesn’t seem himself leaving one religion and joining another. Paul remains a Jew. But he now sees the Jewish faith being opened up to those outside the law. Paul faces the revolutionary implications that the whole heritage of Israel, the promises made to the patriarchs, membership of God’s own special people, are now available to Gentiles: to those outside the law, through faith in the risen Jesus, through baptism, not through Jewish circumcision. It is through Paul’s rethinking of what this means that the new religion of Christianity is born, a religion which has at its heart the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but which sees access to this God as a universal possibility through faith in Jesus, and not the exclusive possession of those living within the Jewish law. Paul did not become a Christian because of a guilty conscience or because he was in anyway psychologically needy. He became a Christian because he became convinced of new facts, especially the fact of the risen Jesus, which caused him to see his whole life, its meaning and his future calling and vocation in a completely new way.

Over the centuries many millions of people have become Christians in this same way. They have turned around. It is often the case that those who are most violently opposed to Christianity suddenly come across some new evidence or insight which makes them embrace the religion they had despised. I remember when I was at university, the president of the atheist society became a Christian. Of course there are many who are Christian, at least nominally, because that is their tradition, that is the way they were brought up. But many of us have found and have experienced that there is some decisive moment when the penny drops, when we realise in a moment that the gospel of Jesus Christ is actually true.

I began by talking about Barak Obama, and over this week I have enjoyed reading some chapters in his book “ The Audacity of Hope”. One of the chapters in the book is entitled “faith”. It is a powerful and impressive piece of writing. In this chapter Obama describes his struggles with the right wing, moral majority kind of Christianity that has been so influential in American politics. But by contrast, he describes, with humility but real conviction, his own deepening religious commitment.

Barak Obama did not come from a religious household. His mother was an agnostic. His father had been raised a Muslim but became an atheist. His step-father was a sceptic. Yet, despite the fact that his mother had no religious faith, she brought up her son with a sense of wonder, a sense of reverence for life. Obama describes how he would have happily adopted his mother’s tolerant but uncommitted religious outlook, were it not for the influence upon him of the black church. It was in the African American religious tradition that he found a spur to social change. It was here he found a vision of salvation that wasn’t just about making the individual feel good, but about social, political and community action. He says, here “I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort for the weary or a hedge against death; rather it was an active, palpable agent in the world.” The thing that attracted him about the black church was that the lines between sinner and saved were fluid, the sins of those who

came to church were not so different from the sins of those who didn't, and so were as likely to be talked about with humour as with condemnation. You needed to come to church precisely because you were of this world, not apart from it; rich, poor, sinner, saved you needed to embrace Christ precisely because you had sins to wash away – because you were human and needed an ally in your difficult journey, to make the peaks and valleys smooth and render all those crooked paths straight.

St. Paul became a Christian because of a belief in the risen Jesus and because he came to see that the promises of Abraham were for all people and just for the Jews. Obama, as he describes it, became a Christian because the sense of awe and reverence for life that he had learned from his mother, needed to be earthed in the practical and social community action he discovered in the church. So Obama writes movingly of his conversion:

“It was because of these newfound understandings, that religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world I knew and loved – that I was able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day and be baptized. It came about as a choice, and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to his will, and dedicated myself to discovering his truth.”

Well, you could say, ah he's a politician, he only professes religion to gain votes in a deeply religious nation. But I don't think so. Don't get me wrong: I'm no way intending to elevate Barak Obama to the status of St. Paul! Yes, as countless others have also found in their own hearts, the experience Obama describes is real. And Obama writes about his faith with admirable critical integrity.

And what of us? We live in Europe, a country with much lower religious awareness than other continents like Africa or like the United States. Yet for us too there is a spiritual hunger. Each day, we go about our daily rounds, dropping the children at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping in the supermarket. And yet are these things enough? Do our work, our possessions, our hobbies or the sheer business of life fulfil us? Do we not also long for a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to our lives, something that will relieve a chronic loneliness or lift us above the exhausting, relentless toil of our daily lives. We too need an assurance that someone out there cares for us, and is listening to us, and that we are not just destined to travel down a long highway towards nothingness.

The brilliant Jewish intellectual St. Paul, countless millions of ordinary and extraordinary people through the ages, the new President of the United States, have found meaning, insight and new hope through a faith and trust in God through Jesus. Maybe, perhaps even today, you might take that step of faith yourself. Perhaps you too might find the Spirit of God beckoning you into a new life. You probably won't see a bright light on the road to Damascus, though some do. But, nonetheless, you could have a real encounter with Jesus in the prayerful atmosphere of this church, through our worship, through receiving the bread and wine in communion, today. It has been an historic week in the history of the world. Perhaps it could also be an historic week, personally, for you.