



Introduction

St. Paul, one time persecutor of the early Church and later Apostle to the Gentiles, is often referred to as the “***theologian of the cross.***” At the heart of his spiritual experience and the theology that flowed from it stands the Crucified Christ: the one by which Israel and the whole of humanity is redeemed. In Paul’s eyes the cross is probably the greatest sign of contradiction and paradox and equally the greatest surprise in God’s ongoing dealings with Israel and the world. Given that the cross was a sign of divine *accursedness*, (*Deut 21*) the most despised of all punishments and the most miserable of all deaths it

must have come as a great surprise to Paul that the long awaited Messiah would restore Israel to right relationship with God by his death on the cross. The purpose of this short four week program is to reflect on how Paul saw the cross and its central role in redemption and how he shared his theological insights through his writings and preaching. While I will concentrate primarily on his Letters to the Galatians and the Romans, reference will also be made to his other writings and of course to other scriptural sources. I have also included where appropriate, reference to several catechetical teachings given by our former Holy Father, Benedict XVI in preparation for and during the Year of St. Paul. So to begin let’s look at the person of Paul, his life and history.

Saul, the Zealot: Paul the Apostle

What we know about Paul comes from two main, often contradictory, sources: the first is the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author who wrote the Gospel of St. Luke. According to Luke, he accompanied him on many of his journeys and was quite familiar with Paul and his teachings. The second source is Paul himself and more particularly his own letters. These letters represent Paul’s own version of events, his theology and his drive to bring the message of the gospel to the far corners of the world. Throughout his life, Paul traveled thousands of miles around the Mediterranean; ensuring that this sect of Judaism would become a worldwide faith, open to all. It is in the way that Paul embraced this divinely given mission that makes him such an interesting character. Certain of his mission, he never waivers in faith, although he does express his frustrations and his own personal sense of limitation from time to time. He is courageous and according to tradition Paul suffered martyrdom under the Emperor Nero around the year 67 AD.

The Church Historian and 4th century Bishop Eusebius records three descriptions of Paul. The first, a diptych dating from the fourth century, the second a large medallion found in the catacombs of Domitilla, Rome and the third an early glass dish of Paul with the other disciples, now on exhibit at the British Museum. They describe a man of small stature, with broad shoulders, somewhat bald with a slightly aquiline nose, closely knitted eyebrows, grayish beard and a pleasing and affable manner. Tradition places the date of his death around the year 67AD, making his ministry almost thirty years of travel, preaching and hardship.

Paul's Encounter with Jesus and his Conversion

Perhaps no other conversion has captured the imagination of people as the story of Saul's encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. So important is this event that it is recorded three times in the Book of Acts, once as a narrative (***Acts 9:3-9***) and then again on two separate occasions in the recorded testimony of Paul himself (***Acts 22: 3-21 and 26:9-23***). Pope Benedict referred to this event as ***“first and foremost a work of the grace of god who acted in his own inscrutable ways.”***



Surprisingly enough, when Paul later writes of this event in his own letters he makes no mention of where it took place. But however difficult it is to determine what exactly happened, we know that something momentous happened in his life that turned Saul the persecutor of the followers of Jesus into one of its most fervent advocates. Indeed it should be noted that in some ways the word ***“conversion”*** does little to capture the enormity of the event. For Saul life is not just changed by his encounter with Christ but is turned upside down and inside out! Pope Benedict reminds us that what is pointed out theologically is also brought about physically as Paul is healed of his inner blindness and comes to see clearly the truth of God's redemption.

Thus Paul was not transformed by a thought but by an event, by the irresistible presence of the Risen One whom subsequently he would never be able to doubt. This event became the core around which he built everything he believed, preached and wrote. From this time out the only thing that counted for Paul was life in Christ.

“In considering attentively what happened to Paul, one understands that the transformation he experienced in his life is not limited to the ethical level- such as conversion from immorality to morality- nor to the intellectual level- such as a change in his way of understanding reality- but rather, is a matter of the radical renewal of his being, similar in many respects to a rebirth. This transformation is founded on participation in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ: *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20) Pope Benedict XVI*

So what can we know about the life of Paul?

From reading both the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Epistles we know that Paul, originally called Saul, after the first Jewish King, was born around the year 15AD in the seaport town of Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia (in modern Turkey). He claims to be both a Roman citizen (*Acts*



16:37) and a zealous Pharisaic Jew (*Phil 3:5*) "of the tribe of Benjamin", the former being an extraordinary claim for one from so humble origins. The late **Fr. Jerome Murphy O'Connor** a biblical scholar at the **Jerusalem Ecole Biblique** speculated that the parents of Paul were originally sold into slavery following a failed Jewish revolution around 4BC. On being freed they were given Roman citizenship and so Paul acquired his Roman citizenship through his parents. Others suggest that he obtained Roman citizenship in gratitude for providing winter quarters for imperial troops. A tent maker by trade, (*Acts 28:3*) he seems to have spent some

time as a student of the great Jewish teacher, Gamaliel of Jerusalem and so was versed in Jewish law and theology. We should remember that education in the first century was very different from our modern understanding. Paul never registered for a degree nor did he have a neatly bound copy of the Hebrew Scriptures to study and reference, let alone a computer to surf the biblical web with. Instead, he had to rely on memory when learning to work out his new beliefs in the light of his Jewish faith. Pope Benedict reminded us that in the early Church baptism was often described as the sacrament of "illumination" that gave light so that the believer could truly see God at work. Here God illumined Saul in a baptism of conversion and spiritual insight.

Jerusalem in the time of Paul

As the spiritual center of Judaism, Jerusalem was also provincial capital of the Roman province of Judea. A cosmopolitan city inhabited by Jews and gentiles, it contained an explosive mixtures of peoples and faiths that often threatened to ignite and caused the Roman overlords to deal harshly with any group or faction that threatened the "*pax romana*". Within Judaism there were many groups and factions that added to Rome's difficulties. Although the majority of Jews did not belong to these groups their influence was pervasive and important. Chief among these groups were the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes. It was to this second group that Paul belonged.

Paul the Pharisee

As a Roman citizen he was familiar with Greek and Roman philosophy, law and the classics. He wrote primarily in Greek blending his Gentile knowledge with his Jewish theology and faith. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Paul's ability to speak and write in popular (*koine*) Greek, the *lingua franca* of the empire, so essential to trade and communication. This ability alone brought him into a world larger than the Aramaic speaking world inhabited by Jesus and becomes the means by which Jewish concepts, ideas and thoughts would enter into the gentile world. But it was for his zeal and persecution that Saul first came to the attention of the followers of Jesus. As a Pharisee he was determined to maintain the purity and discipline of the Jewish faith and saw any divergence from this discipline as heresy.

The first reference to Paul in Acts is in reference to the stoning of Stephen (*Acts 7:58*). In the eyes of Saul, the followers of Jesus were more than a sect. They threatened the very fabric of Judaism in their belief that this itinerant preacher who suffered death at the hands of the leaders of Judaism could be the long awaited Messiah of Israel.



Their proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and now the Risen Lord stood not just as an affront to Judaism but as an indictment of Israel's lack of faith. It would be these very eyes, blinded in the encounter on the road to Damascus, that would later be opened at the moment of his anointing and baptism, when Paul would embrace his new identity to be God's "***chosen instrument***" to carry his name before the Gentiles and the kings and sons of Israel (*Acts 9:15*). Thus Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the Apostle!

Paul and Jesus

Unlike the other apostles, Paul never met Jesus and so was never as familiar as the others with either his teachings or the events in his earthly life. Thus he is his most influential spokesperson never to have met him! Indeed it is on his behalf that he will undertake many hazardous journeys and trials, even suffer death. This is surprisingly so when we remember that Paul knew the barbarity and hideousness of the crucifixion and that in Judaism the belief that one who suffered this type of death was "*cursed*" (*Gal3: 13-14*). So it comes as no surprise to see that for Paul what is important are not the teachings of Jesus but the truth of his death and resurrection. It is this, which defines his theology and faith. In the course of the next thirty years or so Paul would mythologize and theologize the cross, not as an instrument of death and disgrace but as the instrument of new life. So while he defers to some teachings of Jesus on issues such as divorce, his interest is never as strong as that of Peter or James. For Paul the cross becomes an essential and primary element of his preaching and writing.



Paul, the Writer of Epistles

Scripture scholars still argue over which of the letters of the NT belong to the hand of Paul and which to his disciples. Generally it is accepted that out of the 14 Epistles attributed to Paul, only 7 are definitely accepted as being authored by Paul, the rest remain open to debate. As a prolific

writer it should be remembered that Paul does not write to pass the day, he writes because he is concerned, about his people and what is going on in their faith communities. Do they understand the Gospel? Are they living it? It should be noted that many of the letters are in response to definite issues that Paul indirectly refers to. Usually we do not have a clear statement of what the particular problem is, but it is still not too difficult to re-construct its general outlines from what Paul has to say in his written teachings. From his many letters we get a picture of a man who has many interests and friendships, one who is at home with both men and women, one who worries about others: whether they are slave or free. To such people he writes with great love and affection. He is also poetic, writing some of the most beautiful and theologically refined parts of scripture. He is a bundle of contradictions: a manual laborer who wrote with the grace of a Greek philosopher. He is the first great Christian systematic theologian,

formulating in words some of the key concepts of the Christian faith we now take for granted.



Paul and the Cross

An important aspect of Paul's understanding of the cross came from Paul's own Jewish understanding and prior religious training. As a faithful Jew and a strict Pharisee (*Phil 3:5-6*) Paul had been immersed in the belief that one could prove oneself acceptable before God by one's own actions and moral efforts: strict religious observance, proper ritual, sincere motives, perfect behavior and of course Jewish pedigree were all seen as evidence that one was justified before God. As a

faithful Jew, Paul also hoped for the coming of the Messiah: the long awaited deliverer of Israel. Although silent on his own personal understanding of what the messiah would be like, it is most likely that like every other Jewish person he hoped for a redeemer who would release Israel from Roman domination and restore the purity of Pharisaical religion. At best the messiah would be a military leader with physical prowess like David and a charismatic leader with Solomonic wisdom and strong leadership skills. He would, as Murphy-O'Connor writes, be a righteous king, a wise judge and loving shepherd who would gather together a messianic righteous community where the unrighteous would have no place. Clearly measured against such a template this Jesus of Nazareth could not possibly be the Messiah!

Surely such a figure would be widely recognized and acclaimed by all. So it must have been a great shock to Paul when he came to recognize the messiah who had been publically humiliated, viciously condemned and brutally crucified, one who had been denounced by his own people and who had prayed for his blood upon their very children. Equally this realization must have made a deep impression upon him. As Jerome Murphy O'Connor pointed out the verbal vividness with which he replicates or imagines the centrality of this one event is best seen in his letter to the Galatians where he marvels at the idea of a messiah who dies.

So when the early Church proclaimed the crucified Jesus as the long awaited messiah who by his death and resurrection had delivered them from their sins and restored them to right relationship with God, this was too much for the Pharisaic Saul. In the light of these despicable claims, the zealous Saul was determined to stamp out this impious and threatening sect:

"I myself once thought that I had to do many things against the name of Jesus the Nazorean, and I did so in Jerusalem. I imprisoned many of the holy ones with the authorization I received from the chief priests, and when they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them. Many times, in synagogue after synagogue, I punished them in an attempt to force them to blaspheme; I was so enraged against them that I pursued them even to foreign cities." (Acts 26: 10-11)

One key preparatory moment in Paul's theological development might just have been the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, as told in Acts:

"But they cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together. They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them"; and when he said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:56-59)

Despite its embarrassing truth, scripture places some of the blame for Stephen's death squarely at the feet of Saul. Here we see that firm and zealous determination to stamp out the nascent Christian community through virulent anti-Christian activity. The young Stephen is stoned not simply because of his beliefs about Jesus but because of his preaching that salvation was no longer the sole and unique preserve of the Jewish people but was now open to all nations. Such a thought threatened to undermine the very heart of Judaism as a chosen people and the purity of its faith. Saul was determined to silence this unacceptable idea at all costs.

It was in this frame of mind that Saul first encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Here in this moment of encounter or conversion Saul's faith, his beliefs, his learning, his whole *raison d'être* all collapsed like a pack of cards. So it is little wonder that he disappeared for three years into the desert to sort out and re-think his whole faith from scratch:

But when [God], who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days. (Gal 1: 16-18)*

Whatever happened during this time of desert isolation and reflection the man who emerged was very different from the Saul of Tarsus. Paul emerged with three unmistakable convictions.

Firstly, that Jesus, the man who was crucified on Calvary and whom he had encountered on the Road to Damascus was indeed Lord of heaven and earth. His encounter was enough to convince him of that! And from it would flow Paul's understanding of the very nature of God as "*one and three*."

Secondly, Paul came to understand that the key to all God's dealings with humanity (every man and woman) lay now in understanding and appreciating the impact and purpose of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Pope Benedict puts it this way: "*every man and woman through baptism in the death and resurrection of Christ participates in the victory of the One who defeated death: first setting out on a journey of transformation that is manifested from this moment in a newness of life that will reach its fullness at the end of time*."

Finally, in the cross of Jesus there lay the answer to the main problem that beset humanity at all levels and in all generations: the problem of evil.

In his moment of encounter it is not hard to see how Saul might have come face to face with one of his own interior struggles and indeed the blood on his hands. ***How could a man of such learning, sophistication and faith have allowed such violent actions and emotions to take hold and direct his life in such a wrong way?*** As he surveyed the world he lived in and pondered the promises of his faith, it must have become all the more clear that such a radical problem would demand an equally radical solution, a solution that only a loving and forgiving God could bring about and that would surprise all humanity. So for Paul, the cross becomes that surprising message of reconciliation: a message of spiritual adoption:

And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2Cor 5:18-19)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal 4:5-7)

© Rev. Fr. James Conlon
Pastor
St. Francis of Assisi Parish
Ann Arbor
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The Theology of the Cross in the writings of St. Paul

Part One: From Saul the Persecutor to Paul the Apostle



***Rev. Fr. James Conlon
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