

## **“Forgetting what lies behind...”**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C. March 25, 2007. (Text: Philippians 3:7-14)*

Nobody other than Jesus himself played as great a part in shaping Christianity as did the man whose family and friends always knew him as Saul of Tarsus, the man who later came to be known to history by his nickname, *Paul* (which would probably be “Shorty” in English, or maybe even “Shrimp”). He was not a big man, but he had a tremendous heart for God.

Paul went through a life experience that doesn’t happen to very many people, an experience we could only call “a *total* conversion.” Many of us have had conversions of a lesser sort—involving at most the choice of a new perspective and a change in the way we think about life. But Saul of Tarsus had a conversion that resulted in a one hundred per-cent life transformation.

He had been brought up as a Pharisee, in the strictest traditions of what we—in our time—know as “orthodox Judaism”. He had excelled as a Pharisee. A very conservative Jew, well-versed in Jewish Law, he was a skilled debater and had an answer for every point raised by people who thought differently from the way he did.

If Saul lived in our time, he’d probably have his own syndicated talk radio show called “*Hebrew Hardball*.” (He wouldn’t be on TV, since he wasn’t very telegenic.) People would call in, and he’d blast the ones who disagreed with him. He’d talk really fast and leave the opposition with no room to reply. He was smart, sharp, and aggressive and he’d shout them down. We’d say that Saul called Paul was a young man who “had it made,” and he had a bright future ahead of him. He was praised by his peers, honored by his superiors, feared by his enemies and respected by his family.

But something happened to this man. In the midst of his active hostility to the Jesus Movement in Judaism, as he visited towns to debate in synagogues with Christians and show them up as the frauds he believed them to be, he had an amazing, miraculous face-to-face encounter with the Risen Christ. You can find several different descriptions of the event in the New Testament. Christ came to him while he was going to Damascus, in Syria, and so it’s called “The Damascus Road Event.” It was so dramatic that it has given the English language a colloquial expression, used even by people who aren’t Christians. Now, if somebody has a life-changing experience, we say he’s had a “Damascus Road.”

Quite a few years later, after he’d become Paul the Apostle, missionary to the gentiles, the old star of “Hebrew Hardball” wrote a letter to his Christian friends in Philippi, looking back on his life and sharing some deeply personal thoughts. He tells them that he’s had to let go of all the traditions that had formed him in his youth. He has turned his back on the legalistic way of life that he’d once regarded as good and right and true—a way of life that enabled him to think very highly of himself and look down on other people, a way of life that encouraged him to be proud of himself and despise those who thought differently, people who didn’t share his perspective on the Law of Moses, people whose theology was “off-base”. He tells the Philippians that he now regards his life in those earlier days and the things that had once counted most to him, the achievements that made him cocky and arrogant, as simply so much “rubbish.” (A more accurate translation than “rubbish” would be “dog dung.” My new Greek lexicon proposes the delicate word “crud”!)

Paul had been transformed. Completely. —And why? Because he had come to see himself and other people, no longer through the lens of Pharisaic legalism, but through the eyes of Christ. Look at what he says, *“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as dog dung order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ.”*

If we're to be mentally sound, we need some way of thinking about ourselves that allows us to perceive our lives as having value. All through Paul's early life, he saw himself as having value because he was a Pharisee, a scrupulous, legalistic Jew. This permitted him to look down on gentile sinners and on other Jews who failed to keep the Law correctly. Having been brought up myself, in my early years, as a very conservative, almost fundamentalist Protestant Christian, I know exactly what that feels like. *I* – and people like me – understood the Bible. *We* kept God's rules. *We* were true Christians. People who didn't think the way we did, people whose doctrine was faulty, and especially people who didn't keep God's rules the way we did were going to be punished. Maybe they'd even go to hell!

After he met Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul – the erstwhile star of “Hebrew Hardball” – discarded his holier-than-thou way of thinking completely. His encounter with Jesus gave him a totally new way of understanding himself, *and* — even more importantly — it gave him a new way of seeing other people, both other Jews and non-Jews. He now saw himself and others as having value because their lives, regardless of what they had been like, had been redeemed by the death of Christ on the cross. He was transformed, and his way of thinking about the future was changed too. He wrote these words to his friends in Philippi, “*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*”

I am convinced that what each of us needs to do as a follower of Christ, and what every congregation and every Christian body needs to do is the same: *forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead*, pressing on towards the fullness of what Christ our Savior died to win for us. As I look at the current controversies ripping at the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, it makes me incredibly sad. I see posturing and pride on both sides of these issues. I see arrogance and conceit that allows those of each persuasion to look down on the people who think differently and despise them. Among those of the most extreme views, I see eager partisans who want to “win,” who want to “have it their way.” But this is not the way of Christ, and it is not the way of little Paul of Tarsus – small of stature, but great in faith – who gave up pride in his legalistic superiority in order to follow Christ and be found in union with Him.

Paul said, “*Forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward to what lies ahead.*” We cannot know the future. We can't see more than the next step in the road ahead. The earliest Christians lived in the expectation that Christ, who had been raised from the dead, would soon return on the clouds of heaven with power and glory. They yearned for the Lord's return, when the present evil age would end and the golden age of the Messiah would begin. Two thousand years have gone by, and it hasn't happened yet. I don't think we're going to see it in our lifetimes either —that golden age when all our uncertainties will be settled and every wrong will be put right, when evil will be vanquished and God's truth will be self-evident and reign supreme.

There is no single event, no act of church councils or pronouncement by bishops and archbishops that is going to usher in a new golden age for anybody or any church. Every event in church history that has been trumpeted as such a breakthrough has brought as much evil in its wake as it brought good. But we *can* do this... all of us can do this... each Christian and each local congregation can do this: we can “strain forward,” as Paul said, on the path that leads upward to union with God. We can't make ourselves or anybody else perfect, but we *can* take the next step of faith. We *can* be more diligent in the practice of charity and mercy. We *can* look with greater compassion on those who differ from us. We *can* do better at keeping the Golden Rule and loving one another as much as we love ourselves. And we *can* trust God, *trust God, TRUST GOD* for the future.

And we can celebrate the many little events, the many small signs that the Holy Spirit is still with us – in spite of our errors and failures – still leading us further into the knowledge of God's truth, still bringing forth in us (and in our church and in our neighbors) the harvest of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Take heart, and take the next step. We are *all* precious to God!