

Acts 9:1-20
John 21:1-19

Conversions

What a beautiful day it is?! And what great scriptures to have guided our worship? Sometimes I read the lectionary texts and pick one, but I couldn't do that this time, for they all cried out to be read, and serve as the sermons for the day.

Remember, that these scriptures were given to people whose world and lives were as troubled as our own. It is a mistake for us to contend that if they lived in our time, their faith would not hold up and they would be restrained in their affirmations. They knew the worst as well as we do.

And in these readings there is an emphasis on conversions, not so much from one religion to another, or one sect, or even from one way of thinking to another, but from the depths of despair to the heights of hope; from sorrow and trouble to joy and blessing; from a profound pessimism to a realistic optimism, and all this without any of the circumstances being substantially changed.

And they come with questions that are worth the asking in view of Easter.

Psalm 30 - David

Before we get to the questions, let us take a moment to mention the psalm read in our midst;

“You turned my mourning into dancing. You lifted me up out of the depths . . . brought me up from the grave . . . spared me from the Pit.”

Here we have a song of praise and thanksgiving from one who has been threatened beyond despair to the point of death and been rescued. There have been some happy times. This psalm is “of David” and one can imagine many of the circumstances in his life that could serve as the source of his exclamations. It was a conversion of joy at the transformation of his circumstances.

The larger truth is that every person in every situation is threatened beyond despair to the point of death, and rescued, known some happiness. The question is whether one sees the rescue and praises it, gives thanks for it.

Paul

Then there is the dramatic experience of Saul on the Damascus Road, when he was suddenly confronted by the news that his activities, inspired by his religious faith, were in direct opposition to God's will.

“Why are you persecuting me?” is the question put to him that day, which is just another way of saying, “What are you doing?” Do you realize how valuable everyone around you is? Why are you treating them this way? Do you realize how valuable you are? Why are you behaving in such an undignified way? Have

you thought this through, that God indwells you? What are you doing?

And the blindness, which is such a great metaphor for the spiritual blindness that darkens vision no matter what line we are able to read when we go to the ophthalmologist? But it stands for a blindness greater still.

It was a conversion by overwhelming light. It was a renewal of the mind. And here we run into another question, this time it is not Paul who is being questioned, but the Risen Lord. “Who are you?” was Paul’s reply.

Peter

With Peter, things were a little different but there were still questions. He had sworn loyalty in the most absolute way, and then failed miserably to take even little steps toward the honoring of his vow.

“Do you love me?” was the question for him, and for emphasis, one time for each denial, it was repeated three times. But this failure was not the end for Peter any more than the Pit was David’s end, or Paul’s blindness. It was a conversion by re-instatement; by redemption and a renewal of the call to discipleship. It was a renewal of the heart.

“Feed my lambs,” Jesus said to Peter and to all of us, “take care of my sheep.” And not as some grudging

duty but as joyful service. When Peter heard the words, “follow me,” he knew he had been restored.

Most Important Question

By these questions I am reminded of the old missionary who came to the seminary and taught the three most important questions in life:

Who is God?

What has God done?

What does God want for me to do?

Thus, we begin with Paul’s question of the Risen Lord, “Who are you?” The followers of Jesus had been confronted with this same question in this form, “Is Jesus the Christ?” And in the aftermath of Easter they were being asked it again, in some ways for the first time, “who are you?” We should ask it daily.

And what God has done is simply this, “offered the only begotten son as a sacrifice of reconciliation with lost humanity, and then raised him from the grave. *That* is what God has done. Before we ask what we should do, just listen to the questions that are put to Paul and Peter, for they are really just re-statements of one of the old missionary’s most important questions.

What are you doing? Why?

Do you love me?

These are the great Resurrection questions and we should hear them with the sound of Easter ringing in

our ears. Without Easter they are fearsome and besides that irrelevant. But we are not without Easter, and with Easter they are nourishing and enriching and give fullness to every moment of our lives.

Happy Times

So let us talk about happy times, and what they indicate. Basically, no one deserves to be happy, not even for a moment. We each deserve nothing but trouble and pain and disappointment. But we *do* have happy times. These are the signs of Easter. They are the Grace of God.

The trouble and the pain and the hardship is part of the old life that is going away.

When good things happen, and each of our happinesses are a little different, they are interesting in their variety and uniqueness, but they announce the coming kingdom, so let us hear the words of the psalmist, “You turned my mourning into dancing . . . You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” and make these words our own.

With the happy times fresh on our minds, let the conversions happen:

The conversion from sorrow to joy,

From blindness to sight, renewal of the mind

From guilt and separation to forgiveness and acceptance, a renewal of the heart

From fear to confidence; grudging obedience to joyful service; a renewal of the life

Let it be so today.

Psalm 30

I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
2 Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
3 You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.

4 Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;
praise his holy name.
5 For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.

6 When I felt secure, I said,
“I will never be shaken.”
7 Lord, when you favored me,
you made my royal mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.

8 To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
9 “What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
10 Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help.”

11 You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
12 that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever.

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