

CELEBRATING ST PAUL

Acts 9:1-20 [MW17-20]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Kaiwaka, Sunday 02 July 2017

Names are pretty important aren't they?

- those of us who are parents probably remember thinking very carefully before naming our children
- when you start a new group it needs to have a name which suits it and attracts people
- similarly, when a church is planned and built the name is very important

The name chosen for our church here is Paul – *Saint* Paul

- which means that the people whose vision, prayers, dedication, hard work, faith led to us having this special building considered Paul, St Paul, special
- usually it is something of the character, the qualities, the mission the life, words and work that is meant to inspire, encourage and indeed challenge
- so when we have a 'Patronal Festival', as we are doing today it is an opportunity to remind ourselves of these things

This morning I thought it would be good for us to see what we know of our Saint, Paul

- it's a kind of challenge
I am wondering if there are at least ten things we can come up with regarding Paul
- ten things we know that might be the reason he was chosen as the Patron Saint of this church
- things to inspire, challenge and encourage us

Now each one mentioned earns a “prize”

- I have a bag of 12/15 ... but am happy to open a second bag if necessary so, what do we know of St Paul ???

[space for answers and prizes]

Then continue with the first Bible reading, 1 Corinthians 9:1-20

Just to put things in perspective

- here is a brief outline of Paul and his significance

Paul, or Saul as he was known until he became a Christian, was a Roman citizen, born at Tarsus, in present-day Turkey. He was brought up as an orthodox Jew, studying in Jerusalem for a time under Gamaliel, the most famous rabbi of the day. Describing himself, he said, "I am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin" (Romans 11:1)

A few years after the death of Jesus, Saul came in contact with the new Christian movement, and became one of the most fanatical of those who were determined to stamp out this "dangerous heresy." Saul witnessed the stoning of Stephen. He was on the way to Damascus to lead in further persecution of the Christians when his dramatic conversion took place.

From that day, Paul devoted his life totally to Christ, and especially to the conversion of Gentiles. The Acts of the Apostles describes the courage and determination with which he planted Christian congregations over a large area of the land bordering the eastern Mediterranean.

His letters, the earliest of Christian writings, reveal him as the greatest of the interpreters of Christ's mind, and as the founder of Christian theology. He writes, "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" (Galatians 2:20).

Paul describes himself as small and insignificant in appearance: "His letters are weighty and strong," it was said of him, "but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account" (2 Corinthians 10:10) He writes of having a disability which he had prayed God to remove from him, and quotes the Lord's reply, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, Paul went on to say, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Paul is believed to have been martyred at Rome in the year 64 under Nero.

That is, if you like, "the facts"

- Walter Wangerin wrote a novel titled simply *Paul* that I think succeeds in bringing to life the things about Paul that we do not see fully in the scriptures
- so please allow me to share with you a few paragraphs this is Paul talking with Timothy

'Timothy,' Paul said, the smile gone, his eyes locked on mine, his face thrust forward with a sort of urgency, that narrow blade of a nose foremost: 'What if you came with me? What if you came and travelled with me now?'

He had changed.

When first he came through Lystra, he used to react to the actions around him, quick as a sparrow, ready, learning, his expression swift to reflect the thing he'd seen, his words a rush of response.

Now Paul made his own path forward, straight as a sailing ship, expecting the world to react to *him*. Now the expression on his face arose from sources inside himself, and his words were meant - like the words of the Creator - to cause new things to be, to produce events, to invoke. So he presented his question like a gangplank by which to board his sailing ship: *What if you came with me?*

The scars from the stoning the Lystrans had given him were thick and pink at the hairline, a sort of raised astonishment. His clothing was poorer, rough unwhitened wool. And he carried two leather sacks when he travelled, one for food and clothes and pens and paper and personal goods, the other for the needles and knives and material of his trade. I had not known before that he worked in canvas and leather.

He said, 'I need an amanuensis.'

I said, 'Where would we go?'

'I am beholden to no one now,' Paul said, sailing his own waters. 'No people. No congregation. No authority, not in Jerusalem, not in Antioch. Only to Christ Jesus my Lord.'

He released my hand and lifted his index finger between us, as if on the tip of it were balanced a globe, an invisible sphere and mystery. He said, 'What I preach I received from Jesus. When I was a man of violence, he called my name, and I heard, and I came, and I became a man of peace. But long before I could hear at all - even from my mother's womb - the Lord God had called me, called me to preach in the strength of the name of Jesus. And then five months ago...

'Timothy,' Paul whispered, burning me with his eyebeams, 'no more than five months ago, while I stood bareheaded under the early rains, God tore back the blinds of the future and told me to go to Jerusalem. After fourteen years away, I returned to Jerusalem and I showed the apostles the gospel that Jesus had given me for the Gentiles. The apostles added nothing to that! - why should they? It is Jesus who sends me! This hand,' Paul whispered, spreading the fingers of his right hand, 'the pillars of the church took and shook this hand in fellowship.

'Timothy, take my hand. Come with me. Go with me to the nations.'

He extended his hand toward mine again. But I didn't know! I did not in that instant know whether I should take it or not. I flinched, and he froze mid-gesture, though his expression remained unaltered.

He lifted his left arm and pointed backward, as though it were a wing stretched out. 'Where am I going?' Paul said in a fuller voice. 'That way, Timothy. Westward. Into the world. Into the great round world that encircles the sea. And this is the plan. We will preach in the cities. In the metropolises of the empire, where the paved roads cross, where Rome empowers rulers, and commerce reaches the regions around. In every city we will call forth churches, Timothy, even as I was called and you were called. And, like us, these churches will carry the gospel into the countrysides, to the towns and the villages, the hovels and huts. Before the Lord returns they will hear of him. They will believe in him and in his returning. They will confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord. They will believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead - and so they shall be saved. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved from the wrath which is to come.

'But Timothy, my son, my dear son, how can they call on him in whom they don't believe? And how can they believe in him of whom they haven't heard? And how can they hear without a preacher? Take my hand. Take my hand. Timothy, don your sandals and walk into the world with me. *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who preaches good news.* Come, publish the news of salvation with me.'

“Come, publish the news of salvation with me”

- that is the inspiration and the challenge I believe we are being given today

Paul interpreted the message and life and significance of Jesus Christ

- to the people of his day
 - people who came from a very different background
- yet he was able to connect with them
 - and show them how and where and why Jesus was relevant to them
- by our actions, our relationships, our speaking
 - we are to do the same
- show people the Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul did
 - to literally “publish the news of salvation”

Let's take a moment for reflection, then I will conclude with prayer

[time for reflection]

*Almighty God,
you have caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world
through the preaching of your servant Paul;
grant that we may follow him in bearing witness to your truth.
May our love, our prayers, our suffering
carry your gospel to all who wait to hear it;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.*