

## Patronal Festival: SAUL/PAUL

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Kaiwaka, Sunday 03 July 2016

Acts 22:3-16, Mark 16:15-18

[MW16-21]

With Saul/Paul the issue is not what to say but what not to say!

- there is just so much ... Paul is a hinge on which the history of our world turns a foundation on which the faith we share today rests

So let's begin at the beginning – “Saul, the early years”

- Saul was born in Tarsus, the chief city of Cilicia which is in present day which country? (Turkey) {that answer deserves a prize!}
- Saul was born around 0-5AD  
his father was of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, and also a Roman citizen
- which meant that Paul also was a Roman citizen  
and of his mother, brothers, sisters, we know ... nothing

Saul's family were strictly orthodox Jews using the Hebrew language

- and observing Jewish customs at home  
he was sent to Jerusalem at an early age for education  
ultimately being taught by Gamaliel, one of the most famous rabbis of the day
- Saul himself became a Pharisee

However, as well as being a “thinker” he was also a “doer”

- at Tarsus he learned the trade of ... (tent maker) {that answer deserves a prize!}
- in that place Saul also inherited Greek culture and learned to use the Greek language with freedom and mastery in speaking and writing

So we move on a good few years and to Jerusalem to Saul – “a good keen man”

- here he was an apt pupil with real zeal for the Jewish law  
this zeal found a ready outlet in his assault on the infant church of Jerusalem  
his church represented a threat to all Saul held dear
- its worst offence was proclaiming that one who had suffered a death cursed by Jewish law was Lord and Messiah

When we come to the situation with Stephen, who was the ... (first Christian martyr) {prize}

- among those who disputed with Stephen were “some from Cilicia”  
it's natural to think of the young, eager, enthusiastic Saul among them

The Christian faith was called “The Way” by the Jews as a kind of taunt or put-down

- accepting this taunt the church eagerly proclaimed the Way  
but for Saul this “Way” was an ugly heresy to be stamped out  
he did everything he could to oppose this new growing faith and persecute the followers
- in Jerusalem Saul had many Christians imprisoned  
and at times cast his vote for the death sentence
- Saul's intense opposition to the followers of Jesus led him beyond Jerusalem on a relentless search for Christians in synagogues outside Israel

Damascus had a large Jewish population

- so, armed with letters of authority Saul set out on a ‘search and arrest’ mission  
... but a funny thing happened on the road to Damascus – a “change of spots”
- can a leopard change its spots?  
yes, if that particular leopard encounters the risen Christ ...

Nearing Damascus Saul and his party were met by a blinding light and a voice asking

- "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me... I am Jesus whom you are persecuting"
- the number one enemy of the followers of Jesus, hater and derider of "the Way" is told that his calling is now to be a witness for Jesus and an apostle to the Gentiles
- one of the most dramatic turnarounds of all time!  
can you believe it? could they believe it?  
at first the Christians couldn't and the Jews were flabbergasted
- in the end Paul had to flee because of attempts on his life

Which is understandable really – imagine if Steve Smith

- suddenly left the Australian Cricket team and came over to tell the Blackcaps how to beat them!
- would they believe him, and what would all the Aussies think?!

Paul accepted it and his life changed – just like that

- the zealous Pharisee became the passionate Apostle!

There are no surviving photographs of Paul

- however he 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 is of no account"
- there is also a disability which Paul prays to be removed

Paul was ideally equipped to be the greatest of all missionaries

- he belonged to three worlds: Jewish, Greek, Roman  
he was a master of Greek writing, Timothy and Titus are regarded as classics
- being a Roman citizen gave Paul freedom of movement, protection and access to the higher strata of society
- and we already know how immersed he was in Jewish law and custom

So that's Saul who became Paul – all dressed up and ready to go!

- the question is: did he get straight into it?  
did he launch right away into one of his legendary missionary journeys?  
yes ... or ... no? (no) {prize}

From Damascus Paul returned to Jerusalem

- but further threats on his life forced him to flee again  
he returned to Tarsus and for about 10 years we know ... nothing
- then the Gentile mission began to flourish in Antioch

Paul is now a man on a mission – he went with Barnabas and John Mark to Cyprus

- and to Central Asia Minor, founding a number of churches
- he returned to Antioch and argued with Peter  
about whether Gentile Christians had to accept Jewish customs
- Paul of course said ... (no!) {prize}

Then Paul set out with Silas, going through Asia Minor to Macedonia

- with successes especially in Corinth and Ephesus
- after another visit to Jerusalem Paul left with Timothy  
returning with money collected for the poor Christians there
- Paul was seized by a Jewish mob and would have been lynched  
but for the intervention of the Roman garrison

Paul was kept in protective custody at Caesarea for two years, then appealed to the Emperor

- he was taken under escort to Rome
  - surviving a shipwreck at Malta along the way
- after two years in Rome (which is where the account in Acts ends)
  - Paul was probably released and spent further time in missionary work before his final visit to Rome

As well as all this Paul wrote letters to particular communities of Christians

- they were written at a particular time for a particular reason
  - yet very early on it was recognised these letters had a life beyond this
- Paul's letters were highly valued during his lifetime and after his death were collected and accepted on an equal basis with other scripture
- today these same letters still challenge, guide and encourage churches and individuals in their life and faith as followers of Jesus

There isn't time to go into great detail, however there is one aspect I wish to highlight

- Paul is the only New Testament writer who describes the church as a 'body'
  - perhaps this stems from the words of the risen Christ who appeared to him on the road to Damascus saying: "Why are you persecuting me?"
- Paul had no idea he was persecuting Jesus
  - but that is just what he was doing when he persecuted Jesus' followers
- when any part of the body is hurt, it's the head that complains
  - Jesus' words may have sown the seed of that doctrine in Paul's thinking

Paul suggests the members of the church are as interdependent

- as the parts of the human body
  - each makes its contribution in harmony with the others for the good of the whole following the direction of the head: Christ
- as they use their respective gifts the members build up the one body
  - the health of the whole body depends on the harmonious cooperation of the parts
- perhaps that explains why Paul worked so hard
  - to keep Jewish and Gentile Christians united

Paul desired to go on and preach the gospel in new areas like Spain

- we don't know if he ever managed that
  - tradition says that when Paul returned to Rome in AD64
    - he was condemned and executed during the persecutions of Nero
- as a Roman citizen he probably died by the sword
  - the probable site of his execution may still be seen at The Fontane on the Ostian Road
- the place where his burial is marked is near the Basilica of St Paul in Rome
  - there, beneath the high altar, is a stone inscription going back to the fourth century:
    - "To Paul, Apostle and Martyr"

Paul was a controversial figure in his lifetime – even within the Christian movement

- he had many opponents who disagreed with his interpretation of the gospel
  - in the years following his death however his opponents were largely discredited and throughout the church Paul became a venerated figure
- his letters, together with the gospels
  - became the foundation of the Christian movement

Paul's great achievement was to communicate to the Greco-Roman world

- in terms that could be easily understood
- the good news Jesus announced in his life, death and resurrection
- that communication continues today!

Paul has left a great legacy

- Biblical scholar Ronald Youngblood summarises the relevance of Paul's teaching for life today in four leading themes:

True religion is not a matter of rules and regulations

- God doesn't deal with people like an accountant
- God accepts people freely when they respond to his love
- the Spirit of Christ is planted in our hearts so we may extend God's love to others

In Christ men and women have come of age – there are no 'puppet strings'

- people are set free to live as God's sons and daughters

People matter more than things, principles or causes

- the highest causes and the best principles exist only for the sake of people

Discrimination on the grounds of religion, class, sex or race

- is an offence against God and humanity alike

[pause]

The Apostles, the disciples, were with Jesus in-the-flesh as it were

- yet Paul had an experience any one of us could have:  
Paul met the Risen Jesus

Not everybody has a dramatic Damascus road encounter with Jesus – like Saul/Paul did

- not everyone undergoes or needs to undergo a revolutionary life up-turning about face
- however for each and every one of us Jesus makes a life-changing difference if you have really encountered the risen Jesus then supposedly nothing is ever the same
- your "spots change" – and people notice

Saul encountered the Holy God and was wholly changed

- Paul was a new man with a new mission
- a mission that reaches to us today
- thanks be to God!

Let us proclaim this boldly as we march around our church building which proudly bears the name "St Paul". This is a traditional thing to do on a Patronal Festival, sometimes called "clipping the church", and it reminds us that a church is not just made up of wood and steel and glass, it is made up of people – us! As we march let us also remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us in this place, who by their life and witness testified that Jesus makes a life-changing difference. So please follow me out the door, and around the church, then in again where we will affirm our faith together ...