

Sunday 25 January 2026
The Conversion of Paul

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 1:4-10
NT: Acts 9:1-22
Gp: Matthew 19:27-end

Our readings today give a very dramatic picture of how we might understand callings. God, it appears, had a purpose for Jeremiah, for St Paul, and for the special twelve disciples he called in the gospel. Jeremiah is told, 'before you were born, I set you apart'; similarly, St Paul, whose conversion we celebrate today, says in his letter to the Galatians (1: 15) 'when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace'. The disciples, it seems, all have a part to play, even some juicy parts in the hereafter. There are no auditions, and no exams to make sure everyone is suitable.

Now, all of us might find ourselves called to do something at times without necessarily feeling we have the ready-to-help script to support us. The Head of School at my own university faculty, for instance, called me to be the Lead on something the Government calls 'Teaching Excellence Framework' for the School of Humanities. Given my 'enthusiasm' for Blairite policies on Higher Education, I managed to present something about it to colleagues, mainly to make them laugh. But although we might be uneasy about being given roles in arbitrary ways, it's quite clear from our readings today that this sort of language does exist in the Bible.

Are there many souls like Jeremiah and Paul, who are set apart before birth to do the work of God, without, in the case of Jeremiah and Amos and Jonah, being able to ignore that call? Jesus even seems to make shocking demands for family disloyalty to his followers. Some might protest and say we have no say in all of this, as indeed Jeremiah does: 'Alas, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak, I am too young'. How on earth will this work? Jeremiah seems to say. Others might say, 'well, we need to obey; we have chosen to love God and follow his will. There is, after all the unimaginable promise we heard about in the gospel, the treasure in heaven.

Although such language is indeed in our scriptures, there is one side that I think we may have missed. We might interpret Paul's and Jeremiah's language as 'God would like them to be so and so', as if it is simply a matter of straightforward preference on the part of God. You are to accept that as weak and silly and sinful as I am, God has called me to be a priest. But our readings today also require that we do not think about calling without thinking about our creation. God who forms in the womb is the one who calls. In Isaiah God creates the stars and calls them by name. God calls us by name. Jacob wrestles and he is given a name too, something that was carried over in the Christian practice of baptism. People are at times given new names at baptism, as they are called into life in Christ. Creation or New Creation is a gift that is meant to answer God's call. So, at the most basic level, our call is to

exist, and to be the bearers of our own names, answering to that which God has given us as our individual distinctive identity. Of course, being ourselves, as we say, will require a certain type of discernment; that discernment can be quick, or it can be slow as well.

And this takes me to reflect a bit more on St Paul and what appears to be a dramatic account. Paul writes in Galatians, reflecting on his own experience that 'God was pleased to reveal his Son to me'. However, you will remember that, following the reading from the book of Acts, this revelation of the Son is embodied in the victims of Paul's own persecution of Christians. When he asks: 'who are you lord?' the reply came: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. Jesus is not an abstract voice here. Jesus is those whom Paul is persecuting. Saul, who could have easily been a member of some militant militia in the streets of Damascus today, is, therefore, to discover his true identity as Paul, when he faces his victims, and by doing so, he receives the grace of Christ, and therefore, receives his true humanity. Paul's calling requires that he face Christ in his own victims. Our calling after all is bound up with our own healing, which is what the word salvation after all means. After all the games, and the silliness, and the stupidity of our human nature have stopped, that is when we get to discover our vocation. And from that Paul learnt what he wanted to say and write and do precisely because he was *free* to say and do – having found the sort of language that gave sense to his own claims.

Those who refuse to commit because they think they are keen on maintaining their own freedom, according to this perspective, have a limited view of what freedom is about. We all need to learn speaking and doing things in a particular framework; otherwise, we are unable to do anything. Or else, we will be slaves to our own tyrannical ego. Living with and from God is the framework that frees us from fragmentation and disunity, whose service is perfect freedom, as the Prayer Book put it.

And as this is the end of the week of prayer for Christian unity, we ask ourselves what do we most care about as Christians and witness for in the world? Love of our different institutional powers? Or love of our sense of being victimised by others? Christ asks Peter instead, 'do you love me?'. When we, like Paul, face Jesus, the victim of religious cult and political power grabbing, we come to learn that, as the Creed put it, 'We believe in one God', who acts in history, who helps us see in his own life and death, how our divisions reflect our human shortcomings, and gives us the possibility of speaking to one another, the strength to take decisions, to think about the future, the capacity to see our situation truthfully and act out our vision in accordance with his will, to be in relationship with others in the image of the one God who is love and relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is difficult to bear this but only because he has promised to make a home with us, as he does at this Eucharist, can we find peace, peace such as the world cannot give, as we strive to open our lives to God and find our way in this broken and divided world.

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