

PAUL, THE APOSTLE OF THE GENTILES

The first “biography” of Paul is found in the Acts of the Apostles, attributed to Luke, author of the third gospel. In this book Luke presents the beginnings, the missionary activity of Paul and the expansion of Christianity in the first thirty years.

The primary scope of Luke is not so much that of offering us a biography of Peter and Paul, but to make us experience the powerful action of the Holy Spirit and the testimony the disciples give of Jesus before the Jews and the pagan peoples.

To confirm the story of the Acts of the Apostles on Paul we can make a comparison with the other biographical source of the Pauline letters. From these writings we can understand the human and spiritual aspects of Paul the Apostle, founder of the Christian Communities in the great metropolis of the Roman Empire.

Paul’s Formation

Paul is born about ten years after Jesus in Tarsus, a Greek city in eastern Asian Minor with close ties to Rome. Paul was born to Jewish parents and given the Hebrew name Saul and the Greek name Paul. According to Luke, Paul is also Roman citizen by birth.

The family and historical roots of Paul are the context in which his personality is formed. The knowledge of the Greek language and the opening to the cultural Hellenistic world favours his human and spiritual growth.

As a young Jew, a Pharisee, he is sent to Jerusalem to study scripture and tradition under one of the greatest rabbis of the time, Gamaliel. There is no indication that Paul ever met Jesus prior to the Crucifixion.

Paul becomes a Pharisee

After a few years he returned to Tarsus and then back to Jerusalem where he became a zealous member of the Pharisees and an active persecutor of the disciples of Jesus. In fact, he received the task to go the Damascus to imprison the Christians of that city.

Conversion

According to Acts, his conversion took place as he was travelling the road to Damascus. He experienced a vision of the resurrected Jesus and heard His voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” In a flash of blinding light, Saul became a disciple of Jesus Christ.

From the moment Saul was blinded on the Damascus road, he lived in total obedience to the very One whom he had opposed. The glimpse of the bright glory of Christ transformed the persecutor of Jesus into His boldest follower. After receiving baptism by Ananias in Damascus he began to preach there, but almost immediately, he left for meditation and prayer in the desert of Arabia. Paul dedicated this time to deepening and understanding his vocation and to preparing himself for his apostolate. He understood that Jesus called him to be the “Apostle of the Gentiles”.

Paul: For Me to Live is Christ

From the day Paul was born, the Law, as taught in the Jewish Torah, was central to his thought and life. But his experience on the Damascus road brought Jesus into focus as the centre of his very existence. It was the beginning of a conversion process that endured for the rest of his life. The most far reaching result was a complete rebuilding of Paul's theology.

With the experience of the risen Lord, on the road to Damascus, Paul understands that to be right with God is a free gift from Him and is not a reward for obedience to the law. Paul’s experience of Christ proves this. He was opposing Christ in His followers, and God still freely granted him the grace of seeing the risen Christ. It is this experience that leads Paul to understand that Gentiles and Jews are equally called by God to be His people and are made right with God by a free gift.

COLUMN

The Conversion of Saul

On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

He said, "Who are You, Sir?"

The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do."

Acts: 9: 3-6

The Conversion of Paul in his own words

Acts 22:6-10

EVENTS

**To mark the opening of the Pauline Year
The Pauline Books & Media Centre
Has planned a Talk by Fr. Nicholas King, SJ
The Theme: "St. Paul and His Mission for Today"**

Date: 19 July, 2008

Time: 11.00am to 12.00am

Venue: Pauline Books & Media Centre

181 Queen Street – cnr Cumberland Rd – Kensington

Tel: 011 622 5195

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Paul's missionary journeys, enhanced with archaeological, artistic, geographic, and religious facts that bring to life the story of the apostle's struggles.

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