

## **PAUL: BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

*God, who has set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleads to reveal his Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16)*

Before leaving the earth to rejoin his Father, Jesus' final commission to his disciples was to bring his message of love from Jerusalem and out of the confines of the land of the Jews, to the ends of the earth. There was a big problem involved in this mandate: "Would something which appeared to be a Jewish thing be acceptable to the world?"

Other nation nurtured a strong antipathy towards the Jews because they saw them as too exclusive. Typical Jews of that time believed that since Israel was God's "chosen people," all other nations were rejected by God. Thus they looked at other people with contempt. And in turn, they were regarded by other nations with suspicion, if not with open hostility.

The person who would bring the universal message of Christianity out of its Jewish confines would have to be a very special person. He would have to be a "man from the inside," a Jew, whose racial pride placed him at odds with the rest of the world, he would have to be open to other cultures and respectful of other peoples' ideas and ways of living.

He ought to be a man comfortable in both worlds – the world of the Jews and the world of the non-Jews.

In God's own time, he raised up that man in the person of Paul of Tarsus.

Paul was a Jew through and through. His becoming a Christian never made him a renegade Jews, who would turn his back on his heritage. In the context of his defence against the attacks of opponents, Paul never hesitated to stress his Jewishness: Are they Hebrews? So I am. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. (2 Cor 11:22)

### **What made Paul different from the ordinary Jew of his day?**

Paul was born in Tarsus, which he described as "a no mean city." His boast was not without justification. Tarsus was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia.

It was a large prosperous port and a commercial centre that welcomed traders from all over the known world of that time. It was a celebrated centre of learning that produced and exported a good number of famed scholars and philosophers.

There could not have been a more ideal place in which to bring up a child who would soon be a missionary to the world. In this cosmopolitan milieu, Paul learned to establish his first connections with non-Jews, a fact that as a seed for his future mission as Apostle of the Gentiles.

The final broad stroke that completes this portrait of Paul is the fact that he was a Roman citizen by birth, thus with a claim to rights and privileges which were transnational and transcultural.

No doubt, Paul had this personal background in mind when he declared that, "*I had been set apart before I was born, and called through God's grace*" (Gal 1:15).

God prepared the "bridge" and through him brought across his message to all his children, for whom it has always been intended.

*From the book of Bernardita Dianzon, FSP: Glimpses of Paul and HisMessage*