260125 Conversion of St Paul and Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, All Saints, Hove.

Jer 1.4-10, Ps 67, Acts 9.1-22, Mt 19.27-end

The conversion of St Paul is one of the great religious conversions of all time. Dramatic and life changing, setting him in a completely different direction. It wasn't like that for most of us and this morning we also heard about the call of the disciples in adult life to come and follow Jesus and of Jeremiah who was formed in the womb and born with a vocation to speak the word of God. We've each got different vocation stories.

St Paul was not one of the 12 called by Jesus to be his disciples. Paul did not know Jesus in his earthly life. He was brought up a confident and strictly observant Jew, a Pharisee, the sort of religious person who was zealous. He persecuted the early Church until he experienced an overwhelming conversion on the road to Damascus.

Inevitably his relationship with the disciples was uncomfortable and the tension was partly resolved by his becoming the apostle to the Gentiles and his taking the Gospel out to the Mediterranean world.

There are two sources in the NT about his life – the Acts of the Apostles, vol 2 of Luke's Gospel, and the letters written by Paul that were collected and have come down to us in the Bible, but it's very unlikely that all 14 letters in the NT bearing his name were written by him.

[~~Most scholars think Hebrews and the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) have a different author and Colossian, Ephesians and possibly 2 Thessalonians are sufficiently different for their authorship to be questionable.~~]

It wasn't unusual for people in the Greco-Roman world to use the name of someone well known to give their writing authority and connect it with the thought of someone who carried weight and lent support. But there is no doubt he wrote at least 7 of them. [~~Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon~~] After Jesus, he was the dominant figure in the NT. St Paul shaped Christianity in a way that made it a missionary religion for all the world. His letters to the early churches, and especially the Epistle to the Romans, have been a major influence on the thinking of the Church's greatest saints and theologians throughout the ages and across different Theological traditions, from St Augustine in the C4th to Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley and Karl Barth in the C20th.

As a Jew he would have grown up with an understanding that truth is found by argument and dialogue, the old adage that where there are three Jews there are four opinions. “Only four?” (Rabbi JW)

One of the points made by Roland Allen in his book about the Missionary Journeys of St Paul was that everywhere St Paul went he preached the Gospel, established a church with church order, and moved on leaving them to get on with it. The letters frequently address issues and questions in those churches that seem to have arisen and caused debate but broadly what is happening is not central command and control but letting Christians discover the power of the Spirit and uniting energy of life in Christ in Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Galatia, Rome...

So there is unity – “Father may they all be one. As you Father are in me and I in you, may they all be one.” (Jn 17.21). But if our unity is in uniformity it ceases to be life-giving and can become authoritarian and conformist.

And for a variety of reasons there is an essential pluralism and diversity within the Church. Pauline mage of the Church being one body each part of equal importance having different functions.

This variety gives energy, dynamism and creativity but the flip side is that it can makes us factional and be divisive. So what are the limits to the diversity of the Church? Where and what are the limits?

The Church has always had to struggle with the tension between the unity and diversity of the Church. There are important lessons here not jst for Church but for the whole world of God’s diverse and rainbow people.

Throughout history Christians have sometimes done terrible things to each other in the name of truth. It was recognition of this that led to the start of The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the early C20th.

There are some very moving stories from the experience of our growing together. Part of the story of CT in Westminster was of individuals from the churches in the 1960’s praying together in silence at the tomb if St Edward in Westminster Abbey. On the IoD, in the 1970’s my predecessor was described by the old RC PP as, “that dubiously baptised layman”. Gradually we have moved from seeing other denominations as ‘them’ to ‘us’. In local churches, Christians have become friends. In 1989, with different personnel on the IoD our youngest son was baptised in the parish church by the URC Minister and the RC

PP as one of his Godfather's. In 2010 during Evensong at Westminster Abbey Pope Benedict and Archbishop Rowan Williams prayed together at the shrine of St Edward. And there has been huge progress in the official dialogues between churches, too.

We've come a long way even if we are not yet fully One. So it matters that there's ecumenical Vespers with the RC Benedictine monks 4pm at St John the Baptists in Kemptown and even if you can't come it matters what we pray for and hope for.

On the day when we remember the Conversion of St Paul we give thanks for the diversity of the Church and pray that we may be One in Christ in the unity of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to whom be glory now and for ever. Amen.