Today is the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. St. Paul – one of the more controversial figures in the New Testament. If we did a survey of those in the cathedral today to discover who were fans and who weren’t, I rather expect we would have a majority in the less enthusiastic camp. It’s popular to be rather anti Paul – going back to the sketch from Pete and Dud …. Why? I dare say that if today was titled thanksgiving for the conversion of St. Paul, the thanksgiving of some might be muted …. Why is that? What’s the problem with Paul?

The Precentor challenged me at the beginning of the week to speak about Fundamentalism …. Is the problem that Paul seems like a fundamentalist – intent on destroying life rather than sharing it? Certainly he was a religious enthusiast, one might even say a zealot – and his enthusiasm was, in his early life, violent: not only did he approve of the murderous stoning of Stephen, we read in Acts 8 that he ‘ravaged the church, entering house after house, dragging off both men and women and committing them to prison’. His was a religion of violence – and why was that? What was it that drove him to do that? Elsewhere in Paul’s writings we read of his inner turmoil, his battles with himself around his own purity and we can, perhaps, assume that some of those battles were played out in his external life as he viciously defended the purity of his own faith tradition from the heresy of the new teaching.

The vicious defending of faith always seems wrong. It is one of the paradoxes of the experience of faith in the world that all major faith traditions claim to be religions of peace, but all have defended at one stage or another that purported peace through extreme violence. Not only that, but whilst promising peace to those within the boundaries of faith, they are often quick to condemn those outside to exactly the opposite, and often to celebrate their exclusion. Can we ever claim that religion, in any form, is truly about peace? Of course, the questions are complex, and not really amenable to a 10 – or even a 15 minute sermon. All too often, a faith identity becomes associated with, even defined, by a national or tribal identity – and so a tribal conflict is falsely validated by a religious belief. Similarly, an attack on a religious leader or prophet is experienced as an attack on oneself. I make no defence of the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices, but as I have continued to reflect on the events of two weeks ago, I echo the reservations of those who query where respect lay in the publication of material experienced as targeting, albeit amongst others, an already typically disrespected minority group in French society.

Back to St. Paul – who would not, I think, in his later life have defended with physical violence his understanding of faith. (Though the Old Testament Prophets would have had no such qualms, we might note in passing.) The strength of his writing was, however, not experienced as peaceful – and it’s clear that he fell out with both individuals and churches throughout his ministry. Yes, St. Paul is a challenge – but arguably, one we need. It really doesn’t do to dismiss him, much as some might like – but it is appropriate to wrestle with him, as it were, and allow God to speak to us through him in different ways as we grow and mature in our Christian lives. I have much enjoyed in recent years a book with the unpromising title *Naked Spirituality* by Brian McClaren, one of the American new evangelical writers. The title is taken form one of the stories of St. Francis, wanting to come honestly – nakedly – before his Lord. McClaren offers the passing view that Christians in their early stages of faith, when it looks quite black and white, to value St. Paul as the definitive Christian teacher, pulling no punches and telling it how it is – and how the world needs to hear it. Later, they may begin to moderate their appreciation, and consider it important to understand St. Paul against his historical and cultural context, and listen to him alongside other voices. Later still they may in offended exasperation seek to tear from their Bibles all pages attributed to the acerbic teacher. But eventually they should consider restoring him to the Canon, rediscovered as a Mystic – pointing us to heavenly realities which are beyond human telling.
In fact, the challenge of St. Paul lies, as much as anything, in his challenge to each us to be serious about our faith. Do we take God as seriously as he took us, when he sent his Son to die for us? And the precise challenge of today’s readings is about the challenge of Conversion – for this is the Feast not of St. Paul, but of the Conversion of St. Paul.

When were you converted? Some of you will have a wonderful story, which you will enjoy telling. Others will say, with either pride or embarrassment, that they have never known what it was not to have faith. Still others, perhaps, that they have never known what it is to have it. May I re-phrase the question: when were you last converted? Conversion is a process of re-orientation, a move from one set of values, key reference points to another … and it’s not just a one off event for any of us. It needs revisiting, reinforcing, reexamining, deepening, re-enlivening. The passage today from Luke is actually not so much about Paul – Paul’s story is told again, twice, later in Acts. It sits in its place in the narrative as one of a series of stories about conversion, intended here to demonstrate how the Kingdom is advancing. And we need to be careful about not taking it as a paradigm for all conversion experiences, we can learn some general principles to apply to our own lives.

Firstly, we need to be knocked off our horses from time to time. Actually, there is no mention of a horse in these accounts … we do need to be careful how we use Biblical narratives! But the first stage in conversion is one of disengagement with previously held assumptions and values. Those who have examined the sort of transitions people make in belief have mapped these changes. That disengagement needs to happen over and over again – we fall into grooves and ruts in how we think and act, and need to be disturbed, regularly, by the Holy Spirit of God to re-orientate ourselves by Kingdom values. That is, of course, disconcerting: when our settled patterns of thinking - I know what I think about that, be it Muslims, or gays, or tramps on the street, or even St. Paul – are disturbed, we enter a period of disorientation, even meaninglessness. We can experience this as a loss of faith – and of course, in a sense it is, as we stop believing in the way we have done – but in order to grow and move on, we have to leave the familiar behind, and the path is not always clear. But then meaning re-dawns – we move, figuratively, from darkness to light, the mist clears – and we can once again see clearly around us, but everything looks different, we see things in a different way. This often happens when people travel physically, but it can also take place with inner journeys. Lastly, there is a re-integration into a new network of meaning, which will include a new network of relationships. Now we see all these in Saul’s conversion – but when did they last happen to you?

My experience of coming to Coventry has included a whole series of these transitions, resulting in discover all sorts of new communities of meaning of which I now find myself a part – the cathedral itself, of course, and the diocese. But also the city, and the local arts community. The international CCN. And perhaps most recently a new network of friendships with those from other faiths, which looks likely to seem me helping lead an interfaith walk of peace in London in a few weeks time, as part of a response to the Parish attacks, whilst continuing to wrestle with how to think about my faith in the light of the faith of others, which is equally sincere, but different to my own. These sort of transitions are challenging, often tiring, but they keep us alive, and keep us on the move in the Kingdom.

But above all, as we reflect today on the Conversion of that Zealot for the Christian Faith, let’s allow Paul to challenge us to take our faith seriously, to be ready to constantly re-examine our lives as offerings to Christ for his Kingdom – but also to remember that he called us to be reconcilers, messengers of Peace. We have a job to do here, to speak for serious religion that reaches out to others in hope and love, and does not take up arms to defend itself. Let’s allow ourselves again to be converted – and then perhaps we can convert the world.