

Sunday 18th January 2026; Conversion of St Paul; Benefice
Holy Communion, Ampleforth.

Today we mark the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and we are reminded in our Epistle today that Christianity is about choosing a conversion from oneself to God, through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit. A metanoia, a turning around, a repentance. Everything we say and everything we believe is built upon one fundamental and revolutionary premise: You don't have to stay the way you are. Your life can be radically changed by God. Conversion is a miracle that happens when the life of God connects with human personality to form a new person in Christ. Once Jesus Christ enters the picture, your life will never be the same again. Until then, you may be religious and you may be a very good person, and you may obey all the rules of the church, but you have not been converted.

Practising a religion is one thing; conversion is something else entirely. It is the conviction that long-held prejudices can be overcome, lifetime habits can be broken, and deeply ingrained patterns and behaviour can be erased over time. Conversion is the certainty that what you were does not determine who you are, and who you are does not determine who you will become. You can be changed, you can be different, your life can move in an entirely new direction because with God all things are possible.

We hear a lot these days about 'religious extremists' who appear to control or eradicate anyone who doesn't believe or behave like they do. Of all the conversion stories in the Bible, none is greater or more profound than the conversion of the man called Saul of Tarsus. Saul was an

extremist. Raised a Jew, trained as a rabbi, he became a violent persecutor of the early Christian church. He hated Christ and his followers so much that he did his best to eradicate the new religion as if it were some sort of dreaded virus. He was a terrorist who did his deeds in the name of the God of the Bible. He was a religious fanatic, a bigot, a zealot, a man wholly given over to his hatred of Christians. He would stop at nothing to prevent this new movement from spreading. He had no sense of his need of salvation and no inner voice calling him to come to Christ. It would be hard to imagine a more hopeless case. He'll never be saved.

But he was in one amazing moment on the road to Damascus. The Risen Jesus Christ confronted Saul and changed his life in a way no one else could. Only Jesus Christ could make Saul change - call him, convert him, give him a new name and a new vocation to lead the way for the conversion of the Gentiles. The passage ends on a wonderful note as Paul says that the churches in Judea (which he once terrorized in his pre-conversion days) recognized the amazing change in his life, and they glorified God. From then on, Paul's life pointed people toward Jesus Christ.

Every conversion is a miracle that depends on God's alone and no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus to St. Paul is a profound example of the transformative power when a person meets Jesus Christ. Saul, once a zealous persecutor, became an instrument of God's mission to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. His story gives hope to all who feel

unworthy of God's love or unsure of their ability to serve him.

Today's question then is this, is anyone glorifying God because of you? By how you behave, by who you are, a new Creation converted to following Jesus Christ, does your life point people toward Him in mission and love? If that is your desire and your prayer, as we end the Week for Christian Unity, let us come together in this Benefice and these communities and point to Jesus, together.

Thanks be to God. Amen