

Road to Damaskus

"Conversion is a work above man's power...Never think you can convert yourself. If ever you would be savingly converted, you must despair of doing it in your own strength. It is a resurrection from the dead, a new creation, a work of absolute omnipotence...conversion is super natural work."

Joseph Alleine (1634-1668)

"Can people change?"

If you were ever asked this question by an anxious young person who wonders if marriage will make her lover more 'steady' or "kind" - you know the answer you would have given was "No, my dear". Marriages based on the expectation that the partner will change are a bad thing, and that's why you would have answered the way you did.

Can people change? Of course. They do, all the time. For better, for worse. But just how they change is a complicated process that eludes control.

Which does not mean that loved ones don't have a role to play. About a couple of weeks ago my car radio aired the story of some of the personal struggles of Stephen King: To keep on writing despite being rejected, to find a publisher willing to take him on, his alcoholism and drug use. His family played a major role in helping him turn a corner, both by supporting his writing with unwavering commitment and by confronting him about his addiction and getting him help.

Still, why were they successful and others, despite their families' efforts do not change for the better? Those questions do not have clear answers. People change subtly or drastically or not at all, but just how this happens is different from situation to situation and person to person.

Today we read a story of a drastic personal change for the better: The story known as "the road to Damaskus" - a Sunday School classic, often embellished with drama: how the horse Saul is riding shies from the great light that appears, how the violent man falls off and, stone-blind, gropes for his friends to help him up out of the dust...Such dramatic embellishments are depicted in the telling of the story and in famous paintings of the story; such as in the great Damaskus Road fresco by Michelangelo in the Vatican in Rome.

The way Luke in Acts tells the story is really pretty dramatic. When you compare it to what Paul himself has to say about his big change, you see poetic embellishment in Acts, for sure.

Saul sees a light, hears a voice, falls to the ground and is blind for three days. His companions lead the proud man (who had planned to arrest and try Christians in Damascus) by the hand like one leads a child. In Damaskus a Christian by the name of Ananias ministers to him. The roles of power are drastically reversed.

We are confronted all too frequently with people these days who act fanatically, who are radicalized and "spew hatred". Do you long for good news about conversions for the better? I sure do.

Perhaps that's why this Damascus road story fascinates me.

I want to know what happened to Saul when he became Paul.

Paul himself writes on a few occasions about the great change in him; namely in the first chapter of his letter to the Galatians, and in the 3rd chapter of the letter to the Philippians.

Paul's own words focus on what happened, not on the how: Paul says “ *For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it*”. Galatians 1:14

Paul's own words do not describe how the change happened at all. For all we know it may have happened to him without any one dramatic event, perhaps over a longer period of time.

“But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.” Galatians 1:15-16

In hindsight, Paul sees his life destiny revealed in the change: just like some Old Testament prophets he feels that he was set apart for this ministry since birth- but he sure took a detour to get there!

People wondered: How can such a change be possible? Perhaps Saul's hatred of Christians was exaggerated? Perhaps in real life he wasn't so bad?

So several times in his letters Paul describes how his former life as Pharisee was real and how the hatred he felt for Christians was real. But just as real was the encounter with Christ Risen. His heart was touched. He does not want to tell us how. But Saul turned Paul remains very passionate about that encounter his entire life. He never credits himself with the change and attributes it solely to God's grace and intervention.

And since that encounter Paul understands that he, the former persecutor of Christians, has been given a new mission for his natural zeal. Paul now puts himself on the same playing field as the apostles who had been with Jesus before Easter. Whether they knew Jesus in Galilee or not, all got their mission from the Risen Christ. That is what makes them apostles. Paul's mission now is to proclaim Jesus to the non- Jewish world, while the other apostles stay around Jerusalem, evangelizing among the Jews.

When Paul “sees the light” and meets God in the Risen Christ he begins his new mission on his own.

In Paul's letter there is no mention of Ananias or immediate baptism as in the Acts story.

He says that he went to “Arabia” and at a later point returned to Damascus. Three years passed before he made any contact with the other apostles.

New Testament researchers seem to agree that we should imagine Paul after his big change in the amazing city of Petra in the Jordan desert. He may have studied there some more, firming up the huge shift in his mind for missionary travels around the Mediterranean.

And so the towering intellectual and fierce persecutor Saul has become Paul -which means “little one”. At this point he is still a young man (somewhere between 28 and 31 years of age).

I said I am concerned about radicalization among people in our own country as well as across the world, and that is why Paul's conversion story speaks to me today.

What makes one an extremist? There has been some recent discussion about this in the UK. Quassim Cassam (Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, England) offers this:

“Another extremist preoccupation is purity. The purity that extremists are obsessed with can be ideological, religious, or ethnic. Ideological extremists are not just strongly committed to a specific... belief system. Their commitment is to what they see as the purest or most unadulterated version of their favoured ideology. Their biggest fear is dilution, and they see themselves as virtuous because of the purity of their beliefs... ”

This matches exactly how Paul describes his former self: ” *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* ” Philippians 3:5-6.

Why was he so upset with Christians? It is likely that he considered the Jews who were drawn to the new “Jesus as Messiah” (=“Christ”) movement as dangerous. They were not sufficiently observant of the law and likely mingled too freely with impure people (just as Jesus had done) Saul would have been so hateful because he considered them traitors of his own hard -fought-for Jewish culture, which he would have perceived as being threatened by the dominant Roman/Greek culture all around them. Christians then to him presented a huge threat to the integrity of the Jewish faith at the time. Cassam continues : *“Extremists hate compromise because it detracts from purity. Being an extremist is as much a matter of how one believes as what one believes. Extremists see compromise as a form of betrayal, and while extremists may hate their opponents, this is usually milder than their hatred of people on their own side who have, as they see it, “sold out”.*

Another key extremist attitude is indifference to any adverse consequences of one’s actions or policies. To not be deterred by the practical or emotional damage incurred is the essence of fanaticism, so it follows that extremists are also fanatics. ” Saul was, by his own description, an extremist and a fanatic. Not only did he loathe the Christians, he actively sought them out and made sure they would be “eliminated”. The incident of the stoning of Stephen shows Saul, standing at the sidelines, cheering on those who throw the stones.

Extremists of all shades tend to adopt a psychology of being persecuted and being under threat. Some of us in the church will remember an incident that took place outside the United Church in Digby, when pastor Alex held a video bible study on Islam. A protester stood outside with signs that said that Muslim immigration was a threat to Canada. When I spoke with him, the young man aired a whole list of grievances, some of which were factually wrong, others pointed to a personality full of fear of loss – in this case of “white” culture.

Fortunately, people do change. The “thunder and lightning” conversion story makes for an exciting read but -how real is it? More frequently, people find themselves gradually changing. I offer as possibility that even for Saul, the change to Paul was more gradual than in a simple afternoon on the road to Damascus. If it was in fact a gradual change does it make it any less wondrous?

Today many people do no longer use words like “God” or “Grace” in their accounts of change; yet conversions do happen today. De-radicalization happens today. I invite you to think about the conversion of Saul as a story of “De-radicalisation” of an extremist by God’s grace.

When someone turns from a destructive way and channels that energy into something constructive is it not by the grace of God...?

Let me give you an example: In January 2017 a white Quebequois man entered a Muslim Cultural center in Quebec city, shot 6 worshippers and injured 19.

Maxime Fiset could have been that man. In fact it was someone else. Maxime Fiset was a changed man by that time. He had become radicalized while he worked as a night guard in Quebec city. While at work he had met a group of skinheads. He says the skinheads looked terrifying but turned out to be really friendly to him. They struck up a friendship. They belonged to a group that was anti-immigration Quebec nationalist. In a video he made about his journey Fiset says that radicalization is a

process. Over a few months he was exposed to the thinking of his new friends and became one of them, moving from being a proud Quebequer to embracing neo-nazi ideas. As he got radicalized he created his own internet group. He became more and more paranoid and afraid, indulged in phantasies of violence and finally devised a plan of killing people in Quebec city, including himself. He was arrested and tried in 2009.

How did he change?

After he had served his sentence he found work in a multicultural setting. He says: *“Through work (again !) I met people of different ethnic backgrounds”* and *“it only took a couple of weeks for me to start humanizing my ennemy again”*. When he read a report about a Canadian Youth who was preparing to go to Syria to fight with Isis Fiset realized that *“This is my story, only from Muslim kids”*. He says *“It was obvious that we had been to the same dark places. It was a life changing moment because I felt understood and I felt that I could help”*. So he proposed his work to the Montreal nonprofit centre that had released the report. This centre (Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence) was founded to counter extremism and pull young radicals back from their violent designs. Obviously they were not able to prevent the 2017 massacre but they are successful in a lot of cases and have expanded rapidly. Their model has inspired similar centres in France Belgium and other Canadian cities. Fiset was 28 year old when his de-radicalization happened.

Was God in this conversion? If you look for the flash of lightning, you won't find it. You won't find “God “in Maxime's language either. And yet, what I see in his story is very similar to the Divine Grace experienced and named by Paul.

Radicalized people are among us. The Saul's are among us. What are we to do?

Can people change?

Yes – by the grace of God. The story of Paul and the story of Maxime are proof of it.

When we are tempted to resign ourselves to the idea that radicals are so set in their ways that they are beyond redemption – Can we turn to the power of Love? Can we turn to the One who can bring people to their senses and to the people who are good at this?

We may not be able to be the direct agents who help someone turn their life around, but we can pray for those who are on the forefront of that battle, and we can pray for the Saul's of our day.

Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings, May 1, 2020

Quoted Sources:

The Bible, New International Version

Quassim Cassam:”Why extremism is a question of psychology, not politics” New Statesman, February 18, 2020

La Bombe, you tube film on nationalist radicals in Quebec, 2018