

Dear friends

Saul was utterly exasperated, belly full of anger, about the fact that there were Christians, people 'of the Way' so-called. The fact that he readily received the letters from the Jerusalem leadership enabling him to persecute those Christians, shows that they were just as exasperated and angry. Why? Well, they were exceedingly frustrated that things had not gone to plan. The crucifixion of Jesus which they had instigated had been meant to put an end to the whole Jesus movement (as they saw it), not as a seed-bed for people who now followed in his way or followed him *as the Way*, and who said that he was alive! They did not expect that Jesus' death could have such an effect.

And indeed, how could they? Without Jesus' resurrection and the conviction of his disciples that he was alive, it would not have been possible. That's why they were so frustrated at the growing community of Christians, it was not supposed to be possible.

However, if this was now the situation, had not Jesus pointed to it before his death when he said to the disciples: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*"? (Jn.12,24) Was not his resurrection from the dead the proof and manner of this?

If there were now people who lived and behaved as though Jesus was not dead but had conquered death for all, lived

and behaved in a way that defied both sin and death as though a new reality had arisen and dawned upon them, it was because Jesus had been raised from the dead by the power of God: The same Jesus who three days earlier by the will of God had died on the cross, one without sin but who *“was made sin for us”* ( punished in our stead, 2Cor.5,21). Which meant (!) that ‘in Christ’ – the risen Son of God! - there was now this:

Sins judged and the sinner put to death, forgiveness: **the cross;**

The righteous raised and life everlasting: **the resurrection.** And the people ‘of the Way’ were the people who were *in Christ* through faith. They were people to whom the cross of Christ and the resurrection of Christ had become something deeply significant and something profoundly consequential.

Saul couldn’t see this, not until it happened to him. And we’re speaking of what happened to him as his *conversion* – the event when his eyes (those of faith!) were opened and Christ crucified and risen as God’s word to him became something hugely significant and consequential.

How significant? So significant that he came to write this: *“Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that*

*which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” (Phil.3,7-9)*

How consequential? So consequential it must rank as a first-order event on the map of history. Certainly Europe would not have had the history and development it had as far as the influence of Christianity is concerned without Paul’s conversion and the way it led him on.

How did it come about? At the centre, it is an encounter with Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, revealing to him three things, all of which made for the significance it came to have for him.

1) That Jesus is the Son of God who was raised from the dead and dwells on high as well as in those who believe on him (‘people of the Way’), is present in a living way with the community of believers; Paul realises that the way of truth, the way of God is one of utter condescension, is that of weakness and suffering.

2) That he, Paul (Saul), stands convicted of sin and guilt because his hatred and contempt and his idea of being righteous after the law (!) is revealed to be motivated not by love for God, but by the wish to deny Him; he realises the amazing value of grace – that only by grace does he have a future and that grace opens a new beginning, a new way.

3) That Christ takes him into his service, *“You will be told what you are to do”*; he realises his life is no longer about the way of Saul, but it is about the way of Christ.

Dear friends, the conversion of Paul, such as it was, through the encounter with Jesus Christ was an event that made the

cross and resurrection of Jesus, made judgement and grace significant and consequential. In fact, it was *the* event to do that! And it is as true to say that every conversion is significant and consequential as it is to say that every faith that is significant and consequential is the fruit of a conversion.

You will all know that there are countries and legal systems that have Anti-conversion Laws in operation, laws which seek to prevent the presence and growth of the 'people of the Way'. It is rightly seen that it is through conversion that Christ comes to be significant and consequential in people's lives. Without conversion Christian faith is not to be feared, it is not significant nor consequential; with conversion faith is dangerous, because it is both significant and consequential in that Christ becomes Lord ("my Lord and my God" – Thomas), grace becomes the gift of life and the ruling and principle source of hope and strength and righteous living, and serving God (not man) becomes the way – God comes to have His Way.

Here a church is sometimes seen to be reasonable and non-fundamentalistic for the very reason that it does not push conversion, rather plays it down, and refuses to draw a sharp or any distinction between having converted and being unconverted. While this may be reasonable and non-fundamentalistic, commendable in the eyes of many, it is also a church, and makes for a faith, that is neither significant nor consequential in terms of Christ's cross and resurrection. And herein lies the plight of the church: not in falling and lacking

numbers and generations, but in a dearth of conversions and a lack of focus.

One true conversion is more significant and consequential in the kingdom of God and for it, than are hundreds of church-users that know of no conversion.

A man once recounted being in the company of a minister who agonised mournfully over the fruitlessness of his ministry. This was the minister, as it turned out, among whose very sparse flock one Sunday sat a young man who came to faith through what he heard, encountered the living Christ through the word that preached him in judgment and grace – his name was George Muller (of Bristol orphanages fame; who never asked anyone for a penny, but lived by faith). One conversion, but with significance and consequence.

Dear friends, conversion is not to be blended out but sought. Because it is encounter with the living Christ through his word by the Spirit, by which faith becomes significant and consequential, because it pulls us off our own way unto his. Let us not proclaim faith without the need for conversion, nor let us believe in Jesus Christ without turning to him in repentance and faith, so as to prove the significance and consequence of his death for our sins and his resurrection for our new life (way!).

AMEN