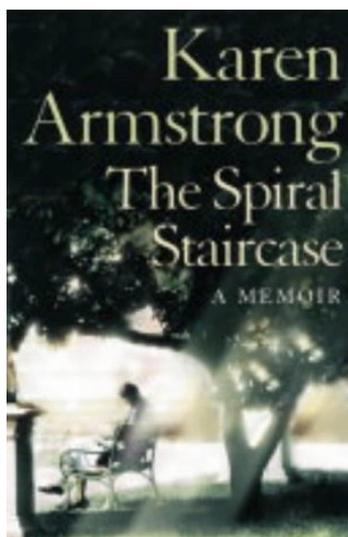
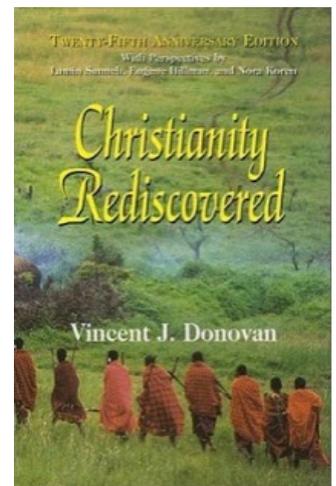


Sermon for the Conversion of Saint Paul (Sunday 25th January 2015) - *Mike Fox*

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Jeremiah's Call and Commission
Acts 9:1-22 The Conversion of Saul; Saul Preaches in Damascus
Matthew 19:27-30 The rich young man ...

Today we remember the conversion of St. Paul, the person who almost single-handedly brought the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, at least according to our New Testament; he is the one who journeyed around the Mediterranean planting new churches as he went and then keeping them going and developing them through his writing. "Why was his message so effective in getting new communities going?", I hear you ask. I am reminded of the Catholic priest Vincent Donovan who took the gospel into the Masai tribe in Tanzania thirty odd years ago; he was struggling to make any headway until he realised that he had to use the tribe's own well-established traditions and hierarchies. It wasn't the truth of the message that was at fault; it was his way of trying to get it across; he had to become almost one of them. There was no way that he could impose his own approach on a tribe so different from his own upbringing in the States. That highlights for me the need to have your own faith – you just cannot follow someone else's, especially if it bears little resemblance to your own way of thinking and understanding.

Donovan wrote up his experiences in a book called "Christianity Rediscovered", and his breakthrough came when he pondered on the effectiveness of Paul's work, of how much was achieved in such a short time scale. The same can be said of the work that Jesus started too; he immersed himself in the Jewish tradition as a child growing up, just as Paul had done – they both became teachers of the Jewish faith, quoting liberally from the Old Testament scriptures. Both Paul and Jesus realised the tensions between the old Jewish law and the new enlightenment that Jesus came to share with his followers. The difference, to start with, was that Paul was insistent that the old law was not to be corrupted and he set about enforcing it in a very violent way – that became his guiding principle, and unfortunately it seems a bit like that for the extremists today who will do anything to suppress what they say they do not believe in. It's arguable that they do not even know their beliefs – they are blindly following their own mistaken dogma and they have no respect for life in any other form. I confess that I do not know what drives them so hard.



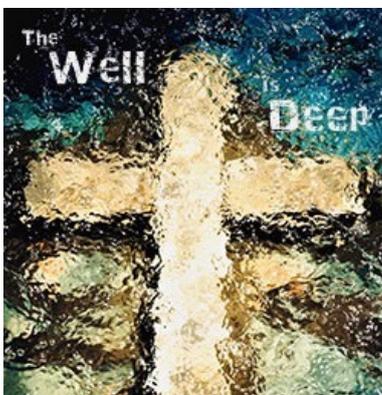
Jesus, on the other hand, was discerning enough to be able to see behind the words and get at the spirit of truth that underpinned all that was being expressed in the scriptures. That, too, came as an alarming experience to the authorities, who didn't like this new approach and were too rigid in their thinking to allow it room to grow. They thought that it would be simple to snuff out the teaching of Jesus – just get rid of him and all would be back on an even keel. But it was not so easy; Jesus left behind a legacy that would fire up his disciples so that they would all take the truth out wherever it was needed. There was another Rabbi operating at about the same time as Jesus, Rabbi Hillel, who was very insightful. Karen Armstrong, in her book "The Spiral Staircase" tells the story of some pagans who told Hillel that they would convert to his faith if he could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. So Hillel obligingly stood on one leg like a stork and said: "Do not

do unto others as you would not have done unto you. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it.” – not what they were expecting at all.

That has probably reminded you of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is said to have stated a similar thing. You can read the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12: “*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*” There are some who would say that Hillel’s negatives give this command a great deal more power – it takes much more discipline to refrain from doing harm to others; it’s easier to be a do-gooder and project your needs and desires on other people. Father Donovan rediscovered this as he came to know the Masai more, and I’m sure that part of Paul’s success was the uncoupling of his deep familiarity with Jewish scripture and endowing it with the knowledge that came to him on the Damascus Road – he knew that his persecution was getting nowhere, and suddenly he saw the light ... he saw that he had to submit to his new-found understanding and take it out to others. And to get them to follow, he would need to stay with them for a while and guide them through, leaving behind at the core of the new church those who could build on the message ... and with a few judicious prompts in his letters, he was able to affirm the new churches. Paul continues to affirm us today.



It may be slightly less well-known, but the same principles apply to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. As we heard in our first reading Jeremiah was called by God to serve his people Israel and Judah. He is thought by some to be a member of the priestly tradition and he was consecrated even before he was born to this work. Some people think that priests are special and set apart from everyone else to perform this function, but others feel that we all share in some way with this priestly function of tuning in to the Spirit’s will and drawing others in. The first few verses of the book of Jeremiah speak of his call whilst still a child and then his commission by God to carry out this work. He clearly feels a little tentative, as we might do too, when charged with this responsibility, but doing it in the power of the Holy Spirit makes all the difference, not just for Jeremiah but for us too. If we take Peter’s vision of all believers being consecrated at their baptism to belong to a priestly people [1 Peter 2:9], then this can be said to apply to all of us.



Today is the last day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is one of those unusual weeks that goes by date rather than by an annual pattern like Holy Week or Christian Aid Week or the Week of Prayer for World Peace; they all fit between weekends. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, however, has been running for over a hundred years from 18th January, the day when the Catholic church remembers St.Peter becoming the first bishop of Rome, and 25th January when we remember the conversion of St.Paul. Peter and Paul were too very different evangelists in the early church; Peter was associated much more with the Jewish followers of Christ seeing the new faith as an extrapolation of their existing tradition, whereas Paul took the Good

News out into the Gentile world where it was essentially enhancing understanding in a new tradition. Over the years, the Christian church has developed very widely and often seems to have its internal struggles about its variety of belief, so praying for Christian Unity covers a very wide and real spectrum of concerns.

Just for starters, we can think of the controversies that have arisen recently over the ordination of women first as priests and now being consecrated as bishops; we can wonder about the expansion

of the meaning of marriage, now being considered as between two people of the same sex as well as between man and woman; we can think of the need for Christian principles to apply not just to our private lives but to the ways in which we conduct business and engage in politics. This year is going to be a very interesting year with the faltering finances in Europe and the UK General Election coming up rather rapidly – what manifesto would the church put forward for that?

Peter, in our gospel reading, seems to be suggesting that by following Jesus the disciples are losing touch with the world around them and with that their worldly wealth. He says to Jesus: “*Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*” [Matthew 19:27]. Jesus seems to be responding that their reward is in heaven but, when confronted with everyday things, that does seem a long way off; elsewhere of course he talks of being a good neighbour and of treating others as you would treat Him. Paul, in his letters [see *Philippians 1:22-26*], also seems to be longing for a time when he can be with Christ and beyond the cares of this world, but he also sees that he has a vital job to do in supporting fellow Christians. Jeremiah’s main role in life is to turn his people back to see God as the centre of their lives – the best way of doing that, it seems to me, is to invite the wisdom of the Spirit into our lives so that we can respond in truth to all that we encounter in every moment of every day. We can show kindness and respect to others as well as reflecting on all that we can be grateful for in our lives; we have much to do on this earth before we get to heaven.



... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN