

The Eternal Relevance of St Paul

(Lecture given by Fr. Edmund Nnadozie, MSP to Parishioners of Holy Cross Catholic Church, Austin, TX. Jan 24, 2009)

This title is chosen to reflect adequately the man we are exploring his life and times. He is a man who is read almost every Sunday in Christian churches all over the world. He wrote more letters and impacted more people than many of the original apostles. He is St Paul, who says of himself “I was given grace to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles, dedicated to offer them the gospel of God, so that gentiles might become acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”(Romans 15:16)

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Consequently, the topic delves into the relevance of St Paul, which after almost two thousand years, could rightly be described as eternal. Another title that comes to mind and also reflects very well what we have in mind could be ‘St Paul, an example for Christians today.’ Paul helped to define for the early Christian community what it meant to worship God. He wrote quite a number of letters,

through which he taught, admonished and exhorted those who were his audience. We begin to know about St Paul from the Acts of the Apostles. Even though St Luke was the author of the Acts of the Apostles, we see that St Paul was a major character in those writings.

His Biography: He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, Acts 9:11; 21:39 about AD 10.

9:11. the Lord said, "Get up and go to Straight Street and ask at the house of Judas for someone called Saul, who comes from Tarsus. At this moment he is praying,

21:39. "I?" said Paul, "I am a Jew and a citizen of the well-known city of Tarsus in Cilicia. Please give me permission to speak to the people."

He was of the Jewish tribe of Benjamin. Growing up as a young man, he was thoroughly schooled in the scriptures and in the Law. As an educated Pharisee, he was filled with the zeal and commitment not only to keep the Law but to make sure that others also kept it. This zeal will help us to understand later his persecution of the nascent Christian community and even more, why he threw himself into defending the same Christian community that he persecuted. In Acts of the Apostles' 22, we read his own narrative of the persecution of the Church and how his conversion came as he was on the way to Damascus (Acts 22:1).

"My brothers, my fathers, listen to what I have to say to you in my defense."

The encounter with the Lord Jesus as he went to Damascus entirely changed his life. It was an encounter that left him convinced that he was called in a special way to fight for Christ. And so he used all his energy, education and faith to propagate the gospel.

His Jewish name was Saul¹, but he started using his Greek name Paul² during the first missionary journey that he did to Cyprus, Pamphilia, Pisidia and Lycaonia (Acts 13:8-9).

8. but Elymas the magician (this is what his name means in Greek) tried to stop them so as to prevent the proconsul's conversion to the faith.

9. Then Saul, whose other name is Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit...

His second missionary journey is narrated in Acts 15:36-18:22, while the third missionary journey is narrated as from Acts 18:23-21:17. These missionary journeys give us an insight into the character of Paul, the communities he visited and the prevailing situation that he encountered and how he set about addressing the issues that needed attention.

Paul's Character: As already mentioned, his education in the Jewish scriptures and the Law made him to be exacting and we could say, rigid in its observance.

He was capable of pursuing an ideal or whatever he felt was worthwhile to any

¹ This name comes from the first king of the Jewish, King Saul.

² The name '*Paulus*', which was Roman, is 'small, short' and later many scholars would say it describes Paul very well because he was of small stature.

length, disregarding the cost. This we see first in his persecution of the Christians and later, in the letters to the Christian communities he helped to establish. He saw himself as God's servant. Consequently, there was nothing that he felt could stop him from doing God's work, neither exhaustion nor suffering, poverty, even danger of death. (I Cor 4:9-13).

9. For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on show right at the end, like men condemned to death: we have been exhibited as a spectacle to the whole universe, both angelic and human. 10. Here we are, fools for Christ's sake, while you are the clever ones in Christ; we are weak, while you are strong; you are honored, while we are disgraced. 11. To this day, we go short of food and drink and clothes, we are beaten up and we have no homes; 12. we earn our living by laboring with our own hands; when we are cursed, we answer with a blessing; when we are hounded, we endure it passively; 13. when we are insulted, we give a courteous answer. We are treated even now as the dregs of the world, the very lowest scum.

He was a highly motivated person, this motivation coming from his conviction that his vocation was unique. "Paul had a sensitive temperament that showed itself in his attitude to those he had converted. He had a childlike trust in the converts at Philippi, Ph 1:7seq. ;4:10-20, a deep affection for those at Ephesus, Acts 20:17-38; he was furious with those in Galatia who were on the verge of apostasy, Ga 1:6; 3:1-3, and deeply upset when he thought that the Christians in

**6. I am astonished that you are so promptly turning away from the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are going over to a different gospel...
1. You stupid people in Galatia! After you have had a clear picture of Jesus Christ crucified, right in front of your eyes, who has put a spell on you?**

2. There is only one thing I should like you to tell me: How was it that you received the Spirit, was it by the practice of the Law, or by believing in the message you heard? 3. Having begun in the Spirit, can you be so stupid as to end in the flesh?

Corinth had become vain and unstable , 2 Cor 12:11-13-10.”³

He was not afraid of taking on anybody he felt was trying to turn away those he had newly converted, especially those he felt were insisting on the Law as the basis of salvation. For Paul, the Law was now subservient to Christ who is the fullness of God’s grace.

Paul as a letter writer: The education of Paul, his cultural background, his encounter with the risen Lord on his way to Damascus and his conviction that he had been entrusted with a unique task, all made him a consummate letter writer, the contents of which were addressed to the Christian communities he either met as already established or the ones he founded. By the year 100 AD, there was a collection of Pauline letters in circulation ranging from the letters to the Thessalonians, which had two parts, to the Corinthians (two parts), Galatians, Romans and even personal letters like the ones written to Timothy and Titus. In these letters, we could see the conviction and earnestness of Paul as he reached out to the various Christian communities of his time. It is remarkable that Paul, in

³ The New Jerusalem Bible, “*Introduction to the Letters of St Paul*” Darton, Longman & Todd. London.1985.

spite of all the travels he did and the many hardships he endured, found time for the laborious work of letter writing, especially on matters of morals and faith. His writing, its contents, its perceptions and worldviews has generated mountains of scholarly work, thesis, commentaries and reviews.

Paul lived and preached the Gospel: Paul was bilingual, knowing both Hebrew and Greek languages. He was aware of the Greek love for wisdom and its inclination towards rhetoric and logical arguments. Paul, though well educated, realized that the gospel of Jesus Christ was not going to be well understood if he used the lofty words employed by Greek philosophers nor the strict observance of the Law advocated by some Jews. Instead, he set out to live the gospel and also preach it. First he admitted that he may be “untrained in speech but not in knowledge” (2Cor 11,6).

6. Even if there is something lacking in my public speaking, this is not the case with my knowledge, as we have openly shown to you at all times and before everyone.

He did not engage in flowery words and imagery to portray the gospel because he was incapable of such, but he was well versed to know how to put across his message in simple words that his audience could follow. Sometimes, though, he was not all that simple, a fact brought out in 2Pt 3:15, i.e. **“Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him in all his letters.**

Some things in them are hard to understand and the foolish distort them to their own destruction”

The many missionary journeys that he undertook and the hardships he was willing to endure for the sake of Christ all showed someone who was putting into practice what he preached. He was not afraid to defend his faith all the way to Rome, which was the center of civilization at that time, an action he knew could result in his death.

Paul’s Relevance for us today

There is no doubt that St Paul, whose conversion we celebrate (tomorrow) and whose anniversary we have been marking all through last year until now was a spiritual giant in Christianity. In so many ways, he hammered out and shaped the contours of Christianity in a way that cannot be overlooked. There are countless seminaries, universities, research institutes, high schools, elementary schools, parishes and vocation centers that are named after him. As earlier mentioned, he is the most widely read person in Catholic churches every Sunday. This shows us the caliber of the man we are celebrating. He proclaimed Christ in season and out of season. When the occasion called for it, he used his knowledge of Jewish scripture to refute and confront his opponents, and he was not shy to remind people that he could have earned enough by preaching the gospel yet he had to

also work and earn his living, not living off on other people. He was as comfortable among gentiles as he was among his Jewish peers. When he wrote his letters and exhorted his listeners, “it is important to remember that Paul’s letters were not meant as theological treatises: most of them represent his response to a particular situation in a particular church. Paul’s letters do not give any systematic and exhaustive exposition of his teaching; they presuppose the oral teaching which preceded them, and enlarge and comment only upon certain points of that.”⁴

One of the things we could hold on to is that Paul, though he did not see the risen Lord, experienced Him in many other ways and preached about Christ. “The twelve apostles had known the actual Jesus and had spoken with him. The apostles had lived with Christ in intimacy. Peter had recognized Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 8:29). Paul did not share in such intimacy with the physical Jesus.”⁵ Instead Paul used the experience of his conversion, the oral traditions he had learned and other experiences he had of the Lord Jesus to put across his conviction and faith. “For Paul, Jesus Christ is the pre-existent Son of God who loved the world so much that he gave himself for the world in obedience to the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Victor Onwukeme, *Being All Thing To All People: Knowing St Paul through his journeys and writings*. (Ambassador Publications, Iperu, Ogun State. Nigeria. 2007.) 18.

Father. Paul is now ready to die also for Christ. This is the reason he says: ‘For me to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Phil 1,21; Rom 14,8).”⁶

We did not experience the physical Christ like the early apostles, but each day, we experience Christ in our lives and in the lives of other people. Countless men and women have testified to the power of the risen Christ, the same message that Paul carried.

Above all, Paul’s life challenges us to use our gifts and talents for the glory of God, the enhancement of our lives as Christians and the exhortation to others to live out fully the potential they have and the vocation to which they have been called by God.

⁶ Ibid. 19.