

## Third Week of the Epiphany Season

**Monday 25 January: The Conversion of Paul**

**Acts 9: 1-22 & Galatians 1: 11-16a**

*'Theophany in Epiphany' - Michael Brown*

*'For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.'* (Galatians 1: 11-12)

### Collect of the Day

Almighty God, who caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul: grant that we who celebrate his wonderful conversion, may follow him in bearing witness to your truth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **AMEN**

In today's longish reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Saul/Paul journeys to Damascus aiming to arrest any followers of Jesus he may find there. Temporarily blinded by a brilliant light, he falls to the ground, and hears a voice speaking to him. A disciple named Ananias helps him to recover, after which, to the amazement of all, Paul proclaims Jesus in the synagogues.

A technical term for what happened to Paul on the Damascus road is 'theophany'. This is a word is similar to 'epiphany': the '-phany' ending means a showing forth or a revelation, for Paul, a revelation of God.

In scripture 'light' is a common feature of theophanies. Just to give two examples:

*'The Lord is my light and salvation, whom shall I fear'.* (Psalm 27: 1)

*'When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me'.* (Micah 7: 8)

For Luke, the writer of Acts, light is a physical representation of the divine glory of Christ as in the story of the Transfiguration.

Here is a quotation from a 20th century German theologian ('Wolf' Pannenberg) which describes an experience he had aged sixteen - similar but different to Paul's.

*"On a lonely two-hour walk home from my piano lesson, seeing an otherwise ordinary sunset, I was suddenly flooded by light and absorbed in a sea of light which, although it did not extinguish the humble awareness of my finite existence, overflowed the barriers that normally separate us from the surrounding world. I did not know at the time that January 6 was the day of Epiphany, nor did I realise that in that moment Jesus Christ had claimed my life as a witness to the transfiguration of this world in the illuminating power and judgment of his glory.'*

This vision of light is different from Paul's in at least two important ways.

- It was an entirely gentle experience.
- It was not immediately decisive.

However, the result of what happened was eventually the same: an unwavering commitment to a christian life.

We need a vision of the christian life which is wide enough to cover the shattering experiences of a Paul and the calm experiences of a Pannenberg.

Here is one such vision.

**The christian life is a drama written by God.**

If God is not put first, then being a christian becomes something we do for ourselves instead of something that God has done for us by acting in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

**God has included a unique part in this drama for each and every one of us.**

If our individual parts aren't unique, the implication would be that God is only interested in producing human robots.

**God invites each of us to take up our part.**

If we aren't invited but are compelled, then our discipleship is mere submission to the will of a supreme being.

**We may not all learn our lines in the same way.**

If we all became christians by the equivalent of learning by heart Chairman Mao's Little Red Book, then many people would be excluded from the start.

**We may not all play our roles in the same way.**

If we all acted as christians in the same way and in the same place, then the christian faith would be confined within the walls of whichever church we attended.

**Unlike other dramas, each of our parts has the same star rating.**

The christian life is a genuine instance of when the verdict of the Dodo in *Alice in Wonderland* is entirely appropriate, *'Everybody has won and all must have prizes.'*

**Or, to sum up: we aren't worth it but God has decided that we are.**

This hymn sings of some of the different ways in which God can speak to us.

***‘Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders’***

1. Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders  
unmistakable and clear;  
mighty signs to prove your presence,  
overcoming doubt and fear.

2. Lord, you sometimes speak in whispers,  
still and small and scarcely heard;  
only those who want to listen  
catch the all-important word.

3. Lord, you sometimes speak in silence,  
through our loud and noisy day:  
we can know and trust you better  
when we quietly wait and pray.

4. Lord, you love to speak in Scripture:  
words that summon from the page,  
shown and taught us by your Spirit  
with fresh light for every age.

5. Lord, you always speak in Jesus,  
always new yet still the same;  
teach us now more of our Saviour;  
make our lives display his Name.

*Author: Christopher Idle*

© Christopher Idle/Jubilate Hymns Ltd

And so let us pray that we may be able to make Paul’s words ours and truly say:

***‘But by the grace of God we are what we are,  
and his grace towards us has not been in vain.’***

(1 Corinthians 15:10)