

## THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL

'There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3:28).

One of the major problems which faced the church in St. Paul's time was the tension and suspicion which existed between the Jewish Christians and the Greek Christians. When over 500 years before Christ, the city of Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, the most influential Jews were taken into exile in Babylon and others fled to surrounding countries for refuge. As a result many Jewish people were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world. In all, about 15,000 of the cream of their political, religious and academic leaders were deported to Babylon, and the remainder were scattered to Egypt and elsewhere. So the people of Israel had begun to be scattered among the nations of the world. This period in Jewish history, known as the Exile, lasted for about 50 years, after which Jerusalem was restored and a new Temple was built. But many Jews had, during the half century, settled down quite happily in exile and had made the best of it.

So, as a consequence of this, when the Christian faith began to spread after the momentous events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, it began in Jerusalem with the disciples, who were all Jews, and it spread to many other descendants of Jewish families who had lived in exile for 500 years. These people had throughout those years been influenced by Greek religions and culture. They spoke the Greek language and had married into Greek families.

There were many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem at that time who felt that anyone who wanted to join the church and become a Christian, would first have to become a Jew - which would mean becoming circumcised. Others who lived abroad as it were, felt that circumcision was not necessary - and neither was it necessary to keep the ten commandments.

As you know there is nothing more heated in the affairs of man as religious argument. The controversy was a great source of pain for St. Paul especially. He himself was a Jewish Rabbi as well as a Roman citizen and, as we heard in the New Testament reading this morning, he was a convert to Christianity. His letters to the churches at Galatia and Rome are concerned primarily with this controversy. According to Paul, circumcision was meaningless - what really mattered was the inner conviction that Christ was the Messiah and that he had died for the forgiveness of our sins. The Jewish Law, according to St. Paul, was intended to be like a guardian for us until the Messiah came. Now we are justified in the sight of God by faith in Christ. Now that time has come, said Paul, we are no longer under that guardian, and you are, all of you, sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. There are no more distinctions to be made between Jew and Greek - not even between male and female - but all are one in Christ Jesus.

For us today, circumstances are different - we have other things to argue about. But the problem and the teaching which the problem drew from the pen of St. Paul are still profoundly relevant. Thanks to William Wilberforce of Hull, there is now no distinction between slave and free in our country at least. There is non-the-less in our country and within the church a distinction between working

class and middle-class which doesn't take seriously the needs of the poor, the underprivileged and the unemployed. The church is predominantly middle-class and many working class people feel alienated from her.

There is also a sharp distinction between male and female, although in recent years more women are being trained for ministry. The church has a poor record in regard to her attitude to women. Racial discrimination continues to be a serious problem in many parts of the world. In America there is a clear separation between black and white churches.

St. Paul calls us to be the Body of Christ. The phrase comes from his pen - "though we are many, we are one body because we all partake of the one bread". It is therefore not only our duty but our joy to seek where we can to remove all barriers between Christians of different denominations and between Christian and Jew. Let enjoy one another's differences and seek to learn from one another more of the riches of Christ.

AMEN