

Flattened by a Guilty Conscience

The names of certain men are linked with great moments in history: Thomas Jefferson, for molding the mind and spirit of America; Winston Churchill for inspiring the British people in their darkest hour; Martin Luther King for his eloquent guidance of the Civil Rights Movement — it's a long, long list over the centuries, and this morning I want to talk about a man who influenced Christianity more than any other single person during the first 300 years of its history. He was brought up as Jewish as one could be, so deeply rooted and grounded in that faith that when it came time for what we would call college he traveled far from home to study under one of the greatest rabbis of the time. Years later, after a totally unexpected change of heart, he wrote one of the world's most fascinating letters to a small Christian church in the Greek port city of Corinth where some boastful people were causing such problems that he decided to counter them by boasting himself.

“I am not now speaking as the Lord commands me,” he wrote, “but as a fool who must be ‘in on’ this business of boasting. Since all the others are so proud of them-selves, let me do a little boasting as well.....Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I have more claim to this title than they. This is a silly game but look at this list: I have worked harder than any of them. I have served more prison terms! I have been beaten with rods three times. I have had men try to kill me by stoning. I have been shipwrecked three times. I have spent 24 hours adrift on the open sea. In my travels I have been in constant danger from rivers and floods, from bandits, from my own

countrymen, and from pagans. I have faced danger in city streets, danger in the desert, danger on the high seas, danger among false Christians. I have known exhaustion, pain, long vigils, hunger and thirst, doing without meals, suffering from cold and exposure.

“Apart from all these external trials I have the daily burden of responsibility for all the churches. Do you think anyone is weak without my feeling his weakness? Does anyone have his faith upset without my longing to restore him? Oh, if I am going to boast, let me boast of the things which have shown up my weakness!....In Damascus, the town governor, acting by order of the King, had men out to arrest me. I escaped by climbing through a window and being let down the wall in a basket.” (Phillips)

I don't know how all that strikes you, but when I read those passionate claims and watch that strange, wild humor playing over them, I want to know more about a man who has lived such a demanding life and gloried in every day of it because he is the prisoner of a great new loyalty. So I invite you to get reacquainted with a man named Paul, who although he never saw Rabbi Yeshua — Jesus the Teacher — in the flesh, became the man of all men who turned that wandering Poet into an institution called The Church.

But long before that happened, he did what some of our sons and daughters will do this Fall: he left home in what is now southern Turkey to go to school, especially eager to sit at the feet of a famous professor named Gamaliel. Teachers, of course, cannot always control what their students do, and my guess is that Gamaliel had reason to wish his brilliantly fanatical student had learned more tolerance in the classroom.

Because at some point Paul decides that any fellow Jew who becomes a disciple of a Jew named Jesus should be killed. We meet him for the first time when some of his friends decide to stone to death a man named Stephen, who was having such success preaching the new Christian faith that a synagogue in Jerusalem brought him before a judge on charges of heresy. Stephen's defense so enraged his accusers that they screamed at him, held their hands over their ears so none of his words would contaminate them, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him — a gruesome spectacle you would not like to watch. Looking on approvingly that day, perhaps still in school, was the young man who would become known as Paul. The executioners came over and piled their clothes at his feet, for greater freedom of movement as they threw rocks at Stephen's head, and perhaps also to keep them from being spattered with blood in that messy way of killing someone. We are not told how long it took before a final rock finished the job, but we are told that as Stephen died his face was transfigured by a peace and conviction that defied ordinary logic as he spoke a prayer of forgiveness for the ones who were killing him. At the moment, at least, that prayer had no softening effect on Paul, who caught the persecution virus and quickly became such a fanatic that he went from house dragging followers of Christ to jail. As he admitted years later, "I punished them and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." He was, literally, a one-man Gestapo death squad whose name struck every Christian household cold with fear.

When he had arrested everyone he could, others having left town, he got permission to travel to Damascus to hunt down still more. It was a long, slow trip in those days, with nothing much to see or to divert one's mind — just monotonous plodding along, step by step. And apparently, through all those dull hours, the man named Paul kept seeing the radiant face of Stephen as he cried out his final tribute to a man named Jesus, whom Paul felt officially obligated to hate. And other faces came swimming up into Paul's mind like fish from dark water, faces of men and women he had thrown into jail — not because they were criminals, but because they had believed something new. He kept seeing their gentleness, and the strange madness of their prayers and songs as they told each other to be happy for the sake of Christ. He must have wondered why he had never found the peace he saw in their faces.

And then, without any warning, it happened. The agony inside Paul exploded like a blinding light, a voice spoke, and in the mingled pain and rapture of what he was discovering, he fell to the ground. There was a time when I would not have understood how he could fall down when he was not physically struck, but that happened to me once in a moment of overwhelming emotion, so I have no trouble believing how Paul's own inner conflict could have driven him to his knees. The story, of course, is told in the dramatic way of the time, with the blinding light and the unearthly voice, but I think no camcorder would have caught anything on video. I believe with many others that what happened that day was entirely subjective, but it was real and it was unforgettable. The words, "Why are you persecuting me?" had to be the very question that had troubled Paul

through nights and days of all those dreary miles, because there is that revealing sentence in which the Christ of Paul's vision says, "It is hard for you, isn't it, this kicking against your own conscience?" (Phillips). And in that moment, as guilt drove Paul to his knees, and the blinding light of new insight filled his mind, a strange new humility came into his life: "Sir," he said, "what do you want me to do?" And in that moment Stephen had won, and those others who refused to retaliate had won, just as thousands of other wronged people since have conquered their persecutors by patient love: the Nelson Mandela's, the Ghandi's, the Martin Luther Kings.

Not long after his transformation, Paul went off into the desert to spend three years in meditation. He had to make sense of what had happened to him, and given his personality he had to do it for himself, making the great change from rigid legalism to a life of love. What a novel it would make if we could know what took place in his mind during those lonely years when he came to see so clearly that many of the things we do in the name of religion are trivial. The ceremonies and the fastings, the special holy days always so mixed up with religion — he waved them aside. "If you fancy them for yourselves," he said, "then use them to honor God, but don't try to bind them on everybody else. One person honors certain days above other days, another person thinks it's wrong to eat certain foods, but all such things, Paul said, are out on the edges of true religion and have almost nothing to do with it." And then this man, so quick before to punish anyone who did not agree with him, spoke from his new heart the words we have so often forgotten: "Be tolerant of one another."

He was deeply changed, and destined for a heroic life, but no is ever great all the time. We marvel at a man who could turn from hateful intolerance to write Christianity's great charter: "You are all children of god. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, we are all one in Christ Jesus," but like all of us he sometimes lacked the strength to live up to what he preached. He could say in the white heat of one of his letters that love is the most important and enduring thing in the world, but at times a prejudice makes him seem small, and on occasion, when enemies frustrated his work, he lost his temper and called them by ugly names.

So his life, like yours and mine, was up and down, but at his best he was a great man. Convinced that in Christ he was free to do as he liked about food laws, he taught us all a lesson by refusing to flaunt his liberty: "If what I eat causes my brother to stumble," he writes, "I will eat no meat while the world stands." And why would he give up something to which he felt he had a perfect right? Because — and here comes the great challenge we sometimes wish we never had to hear: Because "we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." Not enough, under the new law of love, just to "put up" with crippled lives — we have to help. So, partners in marriage have shouldered extra burdens, and parents, God knows, have done it for their children, and good friends for one another — all of them on the demanding premise that we who are strong have a duty to help the weak. Not those who con us by pretending they can't help themselves, but those who are truly handicapped — it is not possible to practice Christian faith without helping to bear their burden.

It would be pleasant to think that Paul never forgot such noble sentiments, but he did because he was one of us. When he confesses, with genuine anguish, that he has at times failed to do the right thing, and sometimes done what he knew was the wrong thing, he only says what any of us have to confess if we are honest. If we judge him by his weakest moments, we should ask in fairness whether we would want our own worst moments — including certain thoughts that are known to no one else — to define our lives. Even Paul's theology is a problem for me at times. I don't know quite what to make of his views on predestination, and I think he misused the Old Testament at times to make Christian arguments, and at times he is not at his best when he speaks of women and of marriage — but all those moments are few and far between among pages where he expresses some of the most beautiful sentiments ever written. Remember this: we never find a hero if we expect perfection.

There are some things I would like to know about Paul so I could explain them to you. Why, for example, the miracles talked about so prominently by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do not seem to interest him at all. Here is a man who wrote before anyone else, years before any of the gospels we now read, and there is never a word about restoring sight to the blind, casting out demons, walking on water, raising the dead. Have you thought about how odd this is? All these miraculous things would have glorified the One Paul preached on those exhausting and dangerous trips in Europe and Asia Minor but he never once refers to them. I cannot

pretend to know why a man who wrote more Christian scripture than anyone else had no miracles in his theology, but I wonder.

I do know that Christianity, soon after Paul died, was given over to the cult of the miraculous. There were wonder-workers everywhere, and it could be that early Christians succumbed to the temptation to make their blessed Lord out-miracle and out-magic all the others. If this is true, Paul bears no responsibility for it. There is not a hint anywhere that he believed in Christ because of miracles. Even that central idea in Christian faith, that Christ rose from the dead, is a spiritual event for Paul. He has no stories of a resuscitated body that cooked breakfast, ate food, and bore upon its flesh the marks of crucifixion. In so many ways, he was the first unapologetic Liberal in the history of the church — a man who reminded those of us obsessed with buildings that God does not live “in temples made with human hands,” and who reminded every racist that God “has made of one blood all nations of men” and is never far from any of them.

Of all the letters he wrote to young churches, the one to the Philippians is in many ways a favorite, so we'll take a look at it over the next few Sundays to see how it speaks to us in a world Paul could never have imagined. I hope you'll be present.

Fill our hearts this week, Eternal God, with some of the passion

Paul felt, so that like him we can know on any single day exactly

where our highest loyalties lie. Amen.