

## **Worcester Cathedral – 25 January - Conversion of St Paul Baptism and Eucharist 10.30 pm**

Readings: Acts 9. 1-22; Psalm 67, Galatians 1. 11-16a; Matt. 19 27-30

- This is a wonderful day of celebration.
- We are thankful for the conversion of Paul which resulted in the Gospel spreading beyond the Jews to the whole world and hence to us!
- We rejoice to have our Dean Stephen back presiding at the Eucharist this Sunday morning.
- We are here to share in the joy of the baptism of Chloe Chinedu, Lila-Rose Jagger and one of our Choristers, Jackson Brown,
- So much to be thankful to our God for!
- The account of the conversion of Saul to become Paul resonates with so much in our world.
- Here was a man who hated the way in which his religion was being infected by these followers of that revolutionary, Jesus. He was a man with a mission to nip this dangerous cult in the bud.
- We recognise this sort of fanaticism today in those who hate asylum seekers and migrants and others who want to grab territory that isn't theirs. They are seen as dangerous to all that is sacred in our society.
- So it was with Saul. He thought that these new Christians would undermine all that was sacred in Judaism. He got the support of the Jewish authorities and was ready to rampage through the Synagogues in Damascus and violently bring the Christians back to Jerusalem to be dealt with.
- But God had different plans for Saul. He met Jesus on the Damascus Road and there was the dramatic turnaround.
- Dramatic though the encounter was on the Damascus Road, I wonder if at the back of Saul's mind he was already wondering if he had got things right.
- He was present when Stephen was stoned to death by the anti-Christian mob. He saw how Stephen died praying that those who stoned him would be forgiven.
- On the Road he seemed to know who was talking to him, 'who are you Lord', and when Ananias prayed with him he immediately wanted to be baptised and started preaching that Jesus is the anointed one of God. His whole ministry thereafter was to share the wonder of God's love shown in Christ for the whole world.
- In a very real sense, the fact that we are here today in down to the conversion of Paul.

- We can think of many who could benefit us all if they had a Damascus road experience.
- It does happen. In another dramatic story Rutger Bregman the Reith Lecturer who Charmian alluded to last week, highlights Thomas Clarkson who was a from a wealthy family whose fortune relied on the slave trade. He entered a Latin essay competition set by the Cambridge University Vice Chancellor on the topic “is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?”.
- He won the competition and had to read it at the senate house. He rode back to London on this horse trying to persuade himself that the contents of his essay were not true, slavery was OK. Eventually he got off his horse sat on the ground and realised that God was telling him he had to work to see these ‘calamities to their end’. From 1785 to 1807 he worked tirelessly, riding 35000 miles around Britain campaigning until slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807.
- Maybe we can thank God for similar interventions, even if less dramatic, in our lives?
- After the drama on the Damascus Road Paul was baptised.
- This morning Chloe, Lilla-Rose and Jackson are coming to baptism. In their case it is a wonderfully natural result of these children and their parents and friends being part of this community of Christian love. It is our privilege to share in these baptisms together.
- This is a special day for all of us.
- The baptism of a children speaks profoundly of God’s love, his unconditional love.
- They can do nothing to gain God’s love, when they are really small, they can smile perhaps, look adorable, but they cannot do great acts of kindness, they cannot pray or assent to complex creeds, all they can do is just be the babies they are, unconsciously trusting and resting in their parents’ and God’s love.
- I guess we might expect a little more of Jackson! But God loves him unconditionally too.
- Remember old Simeon, as he held baby Jesus in his arms in the temple, he looked into his face he said, ‘Lord now mine eyes have seen your salvation’.
- In the face of a helpless, trusting baby he saw the face of God and his salvation.
- The apostle John tells us that God is love, God’s very essence is love.
- Chloe, Lila- Rose and Jackson have been created in the image of God.
- In a profound way to look into the face of a child is to look into the face of the God of love.
- Today we celebrate the wonder of the fact that God’s love dwells within and surrounds each of them.
- Jesus said unless you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

- Actually, very quickly the church stopped thinking that was quite right.
- Surely, we have to **do** something to merit God's approbation and love.
- Surely, we need to get our doctrine of the Trinity right, we need to understand correctly what Jesus was doing when he died on the cross.
- Surely, we need to behave correctly, we cannot have sinners in the Church.
- Surely, we need to follow the right liturgies.
- The Church even got into the situation of saying if a child wasn't baptised and died, it would not be accepted by God.
- How appalling.
- The Gospel is that God loves us no matter what.
- Again, the apostle John reminds us, 'Herein is love not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son into the world that we might live through him.'
- Jesus came into the world to show this unconditional love.
- During his earthly ministry those who realised their helplessness experienced that Love. The poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the sinners, the foreigner.
- Those who thought they could please God themselves lost out. God still loved them, but their egos got in the way and they could not experience that love.
- The incarnate God of love had to die. Unconditional love is very costly. But unconditional love cannot be suppressed by death and Jesus rose to new life.
- So as Chloe, Lila-Rose and Jackson are baptised today, we are celebrating God's unconditional love for them. There is some deep theology in the water symbolism. For us clever grown-up types it tells us they are sharing in the death and resurrection that God's love brings.
- As these children grow up, increasingly as for all of us, the attitudes of the world around them will become ever more real.
- The pressure to behave or perform in certain ways, and the fear that arises if we fail can so easily distract us from God's unconditional love and prevent us from sharing that love with others in the way we live.
- This is where parents, God-parents and the Church community come in.
- We are all asked to promise to help. This is important. God's love for these children is not dependent on our confession of faith or keeping our promises, but the degree to which they are able to grow in the experience of God's love may be down to us.
- It is in the community of faith that our trust in God's love can be reinforced, and our working out of that love in daily life can be developed.

- So today we celebrate with joy God's unconditional love for Chloe, Lila- Rose and Jackson and for each one of us. Through the symbolism of sprinkling with water we recognise that that love has been brought to us at enormous cost through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are thankful that through the community of the Church we can grow together in our experience of God's unconditional love and be enabled to share it with the world.
- Truly Baptism is the Gospel in summary.
- Thanks be to God.