

Let us pray...

Loving God we give you thanks for the gift of your word, the grace of the sacrament and the fellowship of your people. Amen.

It is a great pleasure to be back with you today, in what I still consider to be my home Church! Which is understandable given that I attended this Church for several years before marrying James here and heading off to theological college to train for the Priesthood.

It's also a great privilege to be preaching at this service in particular, celebrating Saint Paul; and of course, celebrating Heinz and Marge as they retire from ministry here.

My history with this Church and today's festivities has led me to think about inheritance and legacy. As Christians, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, like St Paul; like beloved members of this community who are no longer with us. And yet, we also take our place as those who continue the legacy. We are, in fact, those who prepare the Church for its future generations.

So, what is it we can learn from this well-known account of Saul's conversion? Well rather than focus on the details of the story, I'd like to think about 3 important truths we begin to see when we zoom out the lens a bit.

1) The first truth is that God is full of surprises or unexpectedness

What could have been more surprising or unexpected than the great persecutor Saul becoming the great proclaimer of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul?

I wonder what was going through Saul's mind during those three days when he could not see. The light had been so bright that it had blinded him. When he could see again, everything looked different! Those who were once enemies he now saw as his brothers and sisters; his former friends were now out to kill him; Jesus, who beforehand was an impostor and a fraud, he now believed to be the Christ - the Son of God. It's fair to say that Saul's life had been turned upside down.

2) Secondly, we cannot be who God would have us be without others.

As soon as Saul was able to stagger back to his feet, he had to be led by others to a place of rest in Damascus. While he was there, Ananias visited and greeted him by saying, 'Brother Saul.' Brother- a word of belonging, of acceptance and maybe even of forgiveness. It was difficult for people to trust Saul immediately so Barnabas helped smooth the path. Paul would not have been able to carry out his ministry without the support of others. And I can safely say that my ministry wouldn't be what it is without the love and support you showed me over many years.

3) Finally, God's part in our lives doesn't begin when we recognise it, but when we are loved and called into being by our Creator

The truth is that Paul's story didn't start with this dramatic roadside experience. As our reading from Jeremiah tells us, Paul's journey, indeed all of our journeys begin with our creation. God, who loves us into creation, knows us by our true names from the earliest moments of our being.

If you read a bit further on in the book of Acts, Paul is still referred to as Saul for quite a few chapters. It takes time for him to become known as Paul. And I think we too grow into our identities in God.

Paul's encounter of the light of God in Jesus was so powerful that he devoted the rest of his life to reflecting this light to others. It is almost impossible to emphasise how important Paul's conversion and his understanding of the gospel was for the development of the Christian faith, of Christian doctrine and of Christian ethics. For all our misgivings and for all our misuse of his letters, we do well to remember that Paul is the one who saw faith in Christ embracing both Jew and Gentile. He understood salvation as pure gift, not as a reward for any actions we can undertake. By the grace of God and through faith in God, our relationship with God is restored.

So what about all of this is good news for you here at St Paul's?

Well this amazing story of Saul's is also yours. It is your inheritance and it can be as much a part of the fabric of this Church as the bricks and the roof and the people. One of the gifts you have experienced as a Church community, is that you have had the nurturing care of Heinz and Marge these 18 years.

Remember that you can rely on a generous and loving God, who may gift you something surprising or unexpected both during the Interregnum and in your future Vicar.

In preparing for this sermon, Heinz and Marge, it soon became apparent that it is virtually impossible to put into words our gratitude for all that you have been to us and to this Church community over the past 18 years. I thought about what I could say to a Priest about to retire from Parish Ministry? Perhaps, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest!" or "Well done you good and faithful servant."

But, really, there can only be one saying that comes to mind whenever I think of you especially, Heinz, and that is- "Come then and see how good the Lord is." I heard Heinz say this every time we had a communion service over the several years I was a part of this Church community. And now, whenever I consecrate communion, I hear that phrase as I invite others to join me at the Altar to share bread and wine.

I think this one sentence may encapsulate your whole ministry and way of life. To me, Heinz and Marge, you are people who are always trying to point towards God, not towards yourselves. You are aware of the profound beauty and mystery of finding God in the most simple and basic elements of life- in bread and wine, in nature, in community. And your belief that God is good to all of God's creation compels you to lead conscientious lives, trying not to cost the earth anything and advocating for social, economic, material and spiritual equality for all.

What an inheritance...

Some of what is ahead may be scary because it is unknown. But if there is anything to cling to in the story of Saul; in the story of Heinz and Marge's ministry here and of your ongoing ministry as the Parish Church here in Southfields, I think it is this. The same God, who loves us each into creation, will never leave us. We meet this God, day by day in the beauty of the earth and in each other. And most importantly, through the gracious work of the Holy Trinity, we are each brought into the presence of God, here in this Church, here at this table in bread and wine.

Come then and see how good the Lord is. AMEN.