

PAUL'S EXPERIENCE OF THE RISEN JESUS: PAUL WHO SAW JESUS

A strange thing happened on the way to Damascus...

SUMMARY

Paul had a life-changing experience when the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. It stunned him for the rest of his life. He instantly realized that there was something beyond both death as we know it, and life, as we know it now, and as we perhaps dream about it for the future. The something beyond was a SuperLife. It transcended the differences between life and death, and kept in the person what was valuable in both these experiences. Our outgoingness to others in life now, our outgoingness to God and others in our dying, met, and became a new kind of Outgoing Life. Paul called it the life of resurrection. It meant a way of living now, not just later on. Paul instantly realized that all doublets that we think with, not just the death/life doublet, but also the good/bad, upper-class/lower-class, Jew/Gentile, now/then, here/there, patron/client, doublets, need to be transcended now, so we can begin to think in terms of, and really live the SuperLife now. Jesus showed it to Paul, and gave him the conviction that through Jesus it was possible now for everyone, and in principle already given to everyone. It would be a real openness and freedom. It would be as if the resurrection had begun among us, and as if we were experiencing it working through us to make all humankind truly free. Paul's mission was to set up groups that lived like this. Paul, with them, had to learn what living this risen life –beyond all discriminations - really meant.

'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.

'...when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.' Gal 1, 11-19

WRITTEN REPORTS

Having given something in last month's reflection of the backdrop behind Paul, I think it is more than time to focus more directly on Paul himself. I want to begin with what I think is **THE most important event in Paul's life**. I hesitate only about the word 'event', because I think the experience went on for the rest of his life. That unending event is what happened on the 'road to Damascus'.

There are a number of textual [references](#) to this. In fact, three times in the [Acts of the Apostles](#), chapters 9, 22, and 26, there is a fairly extensive statement about it, but I will omit references to that possible source, because I think Luke has twisted it and interpreted it along his own lines. It is not pure Paul. [I would like to know why Luke did it three times in Acts?]

We take it for granted from Acts that Paul was a [rabid persecutor](#) of the Christian communities in Judea, and was authorized by the High Priest to go to Damascus and round up and arrest incipient Christian communities in Damascus, in Syria. Commentators don't doubt it, but I wonder if it was exactly like that. For one thing, the High Priest had no authority outside Judea... It is more true to Paul's own statements, to think that he was not well known in most of the Christian communities of Judea. [He does say that he was such a 'persecutor' but I tend to read those words as those of a repentant person, putting himself down in retrospect. His language is a bit like that of our act of contrition.]

We glibly say the experience was on the [road to Damascus](#), but the exact location seems to be without much reliable documentation. Everybody has an impression that in the event on the Damascus Road, Paul was knocked off his [horse](#). But if you examine the scriptural texts carefully, in no text in Acts or Paul is there ever any reference to a horse. Usually a person like Paul would not travel on horseback. The horse has been brought in by artists (such as Caravaggio) later. It's a very interesting observation about what you think you see in a text that isn't actually there.

In Acts 9 Luke is telling the story in his own way as part of his 'history' of Paul. In Acts 22 Luke has Paul speaking of it in the temple. In Acts 26 Luke has Paul telling Agrippa and Bernice about it. These are dramatic cameos in Luke's ongoing 'play' about Paul.

Acts 9 gives Luke's account of the intervention by the risen Christ, into Paul's interior experience. Acts 22 gives Luke's account of Paul's self-defence at the Fortress Antonia: the core of his case is that he (Paul) was faithful to the express will of the God of Israel, and that the entry of the gentiles into salvation is not a rupture of God's covenant with Israel. Luke also has Paul saying that others saw the light that he saw, though he alone heard the voice. Immediately after this defence, Paul goes into ecstasy, and receives the vocation of a Jewish prophet, though not primarily to the Jewish people! Acts 26 has Luke presenting Paul defending himself in the presence of Agrippa and Festus, and claiming as a Pharisee to believe in the Jewish understanding of resurrection. Again, the radical novelty of Christ is in continuity with the election of Israel.



El Greco's St. Paul

I depend here mostly on [Galatians \(ch.1\)](#), and a couple of references in Corinthians, which are Paul's own statements about it. The main point is that [Paul saw Jesus alive](#). [Jesus was alive](#). He

wasn't just dead, crucified, finished with, buried and gone – he was living – but not 'resuscitated to his old way of living'. That means he's risen – resurrected, if you prefer the word – and that means for Paul the Jew that the general resurrection has indeed begun. It's on. And that changes his – and everyone's - entire world.

The Good News I preached is not a human message that I was given by men, it is something I learnt only through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You must have heard of my career as a practicing Jew, how merciless I was in persecuting the Church of God, how much damage I did to it, how I stood out among other Jews of my generation, and how enthusiastic I was for the traditions of my ancestors. Then God, who had specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb, called me through his grace and **chose to reveal his Son in me**, so that I might preach the Good News about him to the pagans. I did not stop to discuss this with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were already apostles before me, but I went off to Arabia at once and later went straight back from there to Damascus. Even when after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days, I did not see any of the other apostles; I only saw James, the brother of the Lord, and I swear before God that what I have just written is the literal truth. After that I went to Syria and Cilicia, and was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea, who had heard nothing except that their one-time persecutor was now preaching the faith he had previously tried to destroy, and they gave glory to God for me.

Previously he had heard about Jesus. Perhaps he had not heard very much. He had never met him. He had never physically set eyes on him. He was never around much when Jesus was active or where Jesus was active. I think what he had heard about Jesus would be something like this: that Jesus thought the kingdom of God had come, and various followers of Jesus thought that the general resurrection was starting with the risen Jesus. Paul would have said: 'What utter rubbish!' He would have dismissed it without a second thought. That's where we pick him up at this stage. Whether it was the Road to Damascus or somewhere else, he's heard there's some mob out there that's doing silly things like admitting Gentiles into Jewish communities because of this strange 'resurrection of Jesus' stuff. And he's going to try to stop that immediately, even if he has to do it violently

The Franciscans of Jerusalem have recently noted that the most probable location of the Damascus Road experience was a place called el-Tell (or, el-Sakhra) some 700 metres south of the Oriental Gate of Damascus. [A great monastery dedicated to Paul seems to have been there.] The local tradition, as one might expect, is not unanimous.

I want to look now at **what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus**, and at the result of what happened to him there. All we can be sure of, is that **something happened to Paul**. In Phil 3,12, he sums it up: "**He captured me**".

THE POINT OF IT

What happened can be called **an apparition, a revelation, a conversion, a vocation, a mission. But what was it?** Now all those terms are largely interconnected, and you can use one to mean the whole range of terms. The apparition is like any other apparition. Apparitions do occur and they are meaningful experiences to people. Usually they come with at least a little bit of added on material from the subjectivity of the person that is involved. A revelation is Paul's preferred word for what happened.

Neither Paul himself nor Luke use the word 'conversion' for the experience, whereas they both know that term. [The liturgy speaks of the 'conversion' of St.Paul!]

The Greek word for 'revelation' is *apocalypsis* and it's an apocalypse – it is a vision of what everything is all about finally. The extraordinary piece of Greek in it is that '**God has apocalypted his Son in me.**' This is an extraordinary statement. It is not as though he has seen something or someone *out there*. He has seen it *in himself*. It is a profound thing. That has led to what some people call a conversion – but don't take it as a conversion from Judaism to Christianity. It is not a conversion from one religion to another. It's a conversion, if you have to use the word, from one point of view within Israel to another point of view within Israel. Paul remains, absolutely and until his dying breath, or until his own general resurrection, a Jew. So 'conversion' is ambivalent at best – I prefer not to use it, frankly. And that leads to a vocation, or a call directly from God to do things as a result of this experience. He is not called by a church group. He is not called by the community at Antioch or at Jerusalem. He is not authorised by them. Sometimes he is supervised by them, if you want to use that term. But the call and the initiation comes directly from the God who raised Jesus from the dead – the God of the general resurrection – and it is in terms of that, that he understands his new life-time mission. He has to do something as an intrinsic result of that huge experience.

Sometimes, in descriptions of this experience, you read that he was struck blind. Acts says that, and that he was deaf. Paul says the opposite. In 1 Cor. 9.1, he said: 'Have I not seen Jesus our Lord'. He was not blind. He saw him. He says in 1 Cor. 15.8, 'Christ was also seen by me'. Blindness may or may not have happened afterwards, but there is vision here. Perhaps not physical vision, but real vision, real insight. He says: 'Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ.' I am sure he is referring to what Christ said to him, in Romans 10.17. He actually saw and heard someone. And the 'someone' identified himself as Jesus resurrected, and Paul, with all his background in Jewish understandings of theology and resurrection, was literally smacked between the eyes. He was looking at general resurrection in Jesus, and he said: 'Aaah!' That is the overwhelming moment in his whole life. He was not the slightest bit interested in the physical look of Jesus or in what risen bodies looked like. He couldn't care less – and he doesn't know afterwards. When the Corinthians or one group of them asked him what risen bodies looked like, he said, 'Look, I haven't got a clue'. He said: 'You know you plant seed in the ground and it comes up looking like a harvest. For all I know, we die in the ground and we come up looking like something else. I don't know. Don't ask me. It's not the point,' he said.

We call it 'resurrection', but Paul did not define it as the resuscitation of an earthly body – it was a whole lot more than that, and it was a whole lot different from that. The encounter with this

living Jesus gave him an insight and a message, and he saw it, and heard it, deep down. He **got the point** of it. A point no one had previously even thought of or put words on.

He didn't see a human body. He could not have described its physical appearance if it had one. He knew it wasn't a figment of his imagination. He sensed a presence he had never known. Somehow, he knew it was Jesus. [Remember he had never seen Jesus and would not have known what he looked like.] It was an experience thing. He knew, absolutely, that Jesus (who had died, and been crucified) was alive, and was there with him. We call it 'resurrection'. The encounter with this living Jesus gave him a message, and he heard it, deep down. He **got the point** of it. Then, he lived it.

A SUPERLIFE

What was that point? It was not the way we have often spoken about. It was not that this proves that the Jesus people were right, and all Jesus' teachings must be true. It was not just that the Jesus followers must be right and Paul must have been wrong in his previous convictions. It was not just that this Jesus was now alive 'again'. In fact, he wasn't, with the kind of life he previous had, the kind of life we all have. Certainly, he wasn't still dead either! Rather, **Paul knew there was in the Jesus he met, a Life (with a capital L) bigger than the sort of life we know, and bigger than the death that takes that sort of life away.** It was a SuperLife that includes whatever is positive in both our kind of life and indeed in our kind of death. Jesus was SuperAlive, and living this SuperLife. With a Life that **included both** 'life' in the small sense, and 'death' in the usual one.

How? We are talking about death in a *value* sense, not in a physical sense. Paul didn't mean death in the physical sense. Jesus did not show himself to Paul with a physical body that was a breathing corpse with stigmata in its hands and feet and side. Rather Paul became aware in the Jesus he met, of death in **a 'value' sense.** Perhaps it is a paradox to use that expression. But there are values that dying writes into a person, characteristics and personality traits that the person would not have except in and through the experience of dying. I call them 'values'. These values were in the Jesus Paul met. They are written into and retained and included in his new SuperLife. Forever. They cannot be removed.

This would give a completely different concept of **suffering.** It would also change the idea of **heaven.** Heaven is not a place where you're finished with all the suffering and forget about it and you don't even want to remember it. Heaven is not eternal dementia of everything you ever went through here. Heaven is the opposite really. Heaven is retaining in the fullness of its real value everything you suffered and the whole meaning of your dying. It's a big idea.

You know the way Catholics think about the real presence of Jesus in the **Eucharist.** What many of them are really saying is that they don't believe there is any real presence of Jesus anywhere else. Well, that's not the approach of Paul. Paul was saying that there is a real presence of Jesus risen everywhere and in every suffering of the entire universe. Jesus is at work in the dynamic of resurrection including everything into the presence of his risenness. And I think I can understand why, if Paul had had a horse, he would have fallen off it at that stage. This is really quite a reversal of everything he would previously have imagined as possible.

A NEW SENSE OF GOD

It is hard to say this, but the GOOD that Paul encountered transcends the ‘good’ in ‘good vs evil’. In fact the GOD in whose presence he was, transcends the ‘gods’ that belong to apocalyptic frameworks of gods who triumph over evil. So, was Paul a theist? Yes, but a different sort of one from anyone before him....and from many since. He knew God, differently.

THE CRUCIFIED-RISEN ONE

‘I wanted to know nothing among you except Jesus, and him as the “christos estauromenos” (“crucified risen one”). 1 Cor 2,2

Paul made up a two-word description of this Jesus. He called him, in Greek, ‘Christos estauromenos’. Whenever Paul uses the word, Christos, he means the risen Jesus. [If he wants – rarely – to talk about the earthly Jesus, he just calls him Jesus.] ‘Estauromenos’ – it is a participle, and it comes from the root stauros, which means cross. It is a present participle. It is a continuing present participle. It describes the risen One as in a continuing, ever-present state of Life that includes the values written in to him by the experience of dying on the cross. Maybe we ought to hyphenate and invert the words and call him the risen-Crucified One. It is this person who met Paul on the road to Damascus. The meeting instantly made Paul change what he thought life was, and what he thought death was.

I remember preaching a sermon one day. It was around the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. I was thinking that if she went into resurrection, as the assumption doctrine would contend, do you really think that the wrinkles that she had in this life were still in her risen body when she rose from the dead? The answer would have to be ‘Yes!’ The wrinkles in her, from her care and anxiety about Jesus, would be, in her case, some sort of a share in the crucifiedness of Jesus. And they are not wiped out. They are retained somehow in the values that they place in the person. I’m not talking physically, or in images or pictures, but in what they write into the whole person: her character is permanently and definitively retained. That is an extraordinary concept. It is one that again is not in the prevailing religious imagination of Catholics. When they say “resurrected body” they think “Mr/Ms Universe” and everything is beautiful and perfect. It is not, in that sense. It is perfect but in a different sense of the word ‘perfect’. The usual sense is a narcissistic projection! Paul is getting away from that narcissistic projection of absolute perfection, which is not faith – it is a neurosis. I am trying to convey a little bit the shock Paul must have had when all of that looked at him and he realized it. Even if, *per impossible*, you grant that he was prepared to see an apparition of a risen person, he wouldn’t have expected him to be like that. He’d have expected the opposite. This is the most profound therapy for narcissism anybody could ever come up with. It just shook Paul’s narcissism out of existence. It changed him psychologically and religiously and Christically.

What happened at Easter? What happened was Christ. I am using the word ‘Christ’ in a different sense from a Greek translation of the Hebrew term ‘Messiah’. I am using ‘Christ’ as a code-name in the tradition of Christian faith for Jesus who became in resurrection a place or area of contact

for us all – not just a memory or inspiration. He has become a territory that Christians inhabit. He is the one who inhabits it with us and in us. He is as personal as ever, but **he is no longer as individual as he used to be**. He is realizing his selfhood in our souls and bodies, and in the shared life of us as believers. Resurrection has enabled him to grow himself into us all, and grow us all into him (risen) towards the Father. There is no dead body to mark the memory of someone who has gone into the past. The grave is rent and the stone rolled away. There is only the different, and unqualified, and limitless new life that now ‘contacts’ us all in him into God. This ‘Christ’ is always in the fullest sense contemporary. He always belongs to whatever present there is. Short of our own death, we do not ‘see’ how this can be: we need a new way of knowing, possible only after death, to ‘see’ like that. The issue is not one of our achieving this unity, but of his making it be ‘seen’. Only when it is so ‘seen’ will God’s purposes for creation be fully manifest and consummated. In an extraordinary instant, in Jesus’ resurrectional transformation into Christ, this full ‘seeing’ existed in Jesus. From that moment he is Christ alive and literally at large in the whole universe making the resurrection-thing be seen more and more. But his tears and agony and bloody sweat have left their indelible trace in him and on the ‘Christ-terrain’. His new life is marked by the life he gave. That is why he can and does much more than come to us and help us. In his new life his eternal crucifiedness stamps ours – into our own share in his resurrection.

Sometimes authors suggest that Paul was a man tormented by religious anxieties, and only resolved them – on the road to Damascus – by embracing the ‘hard option’ among the various religious possibilities with which he struggled. Having opposed the Jesus believers as a threat to Jewish identity, having been appalled by the idea of a crucified Messiah, having put his faith in the Jerusalem temple, he turned around and said that true Jewish identity was to be found in and with Jesus, that the only true Messiah was the crucified one, that suffering believers in Jesus were indeed the new temple... Most today see this interpretation as pertinent to the obsessive conscience of the modern European west, but not to Paul. What happened to Paul was much, much more than all that.

TRANSFORMATIONS

Paul had to think out what this meant. I think it took him some years, if not the rest of his life (and eternity).

1. It meant that death was **not a limit or boundary** point any more. It knocked the full stop out of death-full-stop. [I think it also knocked the fear out of it...we fear it because we think it is a full stop.] Paul then realized that if the SuperLife of Jesus did that to death, it did the same thing to **all other limits and boundaries**. So, from now on, since and because the crucified Jesus is so risen, there is no ultimate point in seeing reality in terms of contradictory or contrary opposites of any kind: in being either black or white, in being either slave or free, in being either Gentile or Jew, in being either male or female. **All binary oppositions have ceased to be decisive**. There is something beyond them that is not a compromise between them. Everything is open. Everything and everyone is included beyond all this/that (and in-between). This of course is an invitation to a different political way of living....beyond the concept of barriers.

2. Paul went on to realize that **space and time** are limit points like that. Space means here, not there; time means now, not then. He came to know that the crucified-risen One was **not limited** by the limits of space and time, and by the way we and all creatures work in terms of them. He was, or is, **present in all space-time situations**, but never limited by any of them, and including them all into his new SuperLife. He was present, in a new kind of presence, in everywhere and

everywhen and everyhow of everything and everyone. He didn't live exclusively on some spot near the Damascus Road or any other street. He lived in the universe, and made it different, new. A new creation. A real universe with a center in him.

3. Paul went further, and came to know that there was **an energy, a dynamic, in this presence** of the risen One to subvert all the problems we have as a result of living basically in terms of binary oppositions. He called it the 'power of the resurrection'. In and through it, we are able to transcend all limits and include all opposites. We can live resurrectionally. The higher inclusivity sweeps away the control of all lower exclusions.

4. There are real implications here for **Paul's understanding of God**. In all Jewish thought at the time, only God could bring in the resurrection. In faith in Jesus, God had done this in Jesus. This makes the relationship between God and Jesus very special. They are included together in the full spreading out of resurrection dynamics. You could say they were equal, but we are not talking about people as if they were once at different levels, and now they have come to be at the same level. There is an inclusive mutuality between them always, and that is why and how resurrection (from God) has happened in Jesus. The central way of expressing this is one more instance in the break down of binary barriers. It is the use of the Father and Son language. For Jews, father comes before son and is superior to son. For Greeks, there is no equation between father and son (cf. Oedipus). For Paul, the SuperLife of the Father is in the risen Son, and the risen Son is in the Superlife of the Father. Paul grasped this on the Damascus road. His own words about it (Gal 1) are: God apocalypted his Son in me. This means that God took the 'me' of Paul and brought it into the Superlife lived mutually by Father and Son. You could say - almost - that Paul was raised from the dead at that moment. You could say that he was made Son of God as Jesus was in resurrection, at that moment. Paul intuited instantly that everyone else was meant to be there. This is a different God. This God has many Sons! (or, if you like they are all one in the Sonship of the One Son). **The transforming, or 'resurrecting' experience is one of filiation...** You could say that the top of the mountain is not a point. It is a plateau, and there is room for everyone there.

So what's the point in highlighting your differences, and your **superiority** over other people? None at all. Paul then criticized **Israel**, his own people, for doing that. God asked them, in the Covenant, to be a living example of how God wanted everyone to live. But they were pulling down the shutters and keeping that privilege to themselves, and keeping Gentiles out. Paul came to know that observing Torah, and circumcision, and food laws, and the rest, was as good as keeping candles alight after sunrise. To put all your money on them was a form of idolatry practiced by losers. [He actually called these things, 'good works', and added that only 'faith' in the Risen One would get you anywhere. 'Faith' didn't mean being able to prove Jesus had resuscitated into a continuation of his previous kind of existence. It meant realizing Jesus had actually not done that, but had done so much more than that. Faith is faith in that 'More'. It is not faith in theories about, or imaginations of, resuscitated bodies.]

Paul came to see that if you lived inclusively, and resurrectionally, you were 'in Christ', not in some kind of sublime spiritual experience, but **in the same line of business as the risen One: an energy in the world, to make a difference to it, and to get beyond giving opposites the last word, and so to bring opposites together into communion**. He thought that would redefine the world. It was indeed a new conception of politics subverting every old politics. Paul came to see that if you lived inclusively, and resurrectionally, you were 'in Christ', not in some kind of sublime spiritual experience, but **in the same line of relationship and activity as the risen One: an energy in the world, to make a difference to it, and to bring opposites together into communion**. He thought that would redefine the world. It was indeed **a new politics**.

THE END OF PATRONAGE

In any community, that really believes in this, there is **no room for patronage or clientele or brokerage**, because everybody has immediate access in the risen-one (and in God) to the fullness of the Superlife that's going on in a hidden way in their life. They don't need intermediaries. They would be useless when there are no binary divisions. In fact, even to think of having them is a sin against the meaning of resurrection. It's **an open-access community**. It has to be from now on.

Paul was not culturally educated to think like that. Neither the Romans nor the Jews (or even the very early Jewish Jesus-believers) thought like that. He suddenly realized that this was the name of the game – and what it was all about. He went through an enormous experience. He realized that there was no point in keeping up the old practices and systems. They might have been useful once in the dark, but the sun is risen. And keeping up those practices and acting as if your future is in doing that, amounts to idolatry, because it is putting your faith ultimately in some thing that will eventually let you down because it cannot bring you to the Superlife. It's equivalent to paganism. And doing what even Jews do in synagogues, and maintaining that that's the answer to prayer, is about as useful as Augustus putting statues in the Capitol. Paul didn't take long to realize it was imperative for him to show everybody that this was the name of the game. I use the word 'show' rather than 'tell'. He would have to tell them as part of it, but **showing** them would be more effective than telling them. And he would show them by setting up **new open communities**, including anybody and everybody – all-inclusive communities. Not based on if-and-but. Not based on conditional promises: such as, if you keep the rules, you can keep around here; if you don't, we'll kick you out. Paul especially wanted the old Israel to become part of this. He knew it owed so much to their preparation.

If we could use the word 'conversion' here, we ought to see it not in terms of individual psychology, but in terms of an awakening to something quite other than the social structures of **patronage**. It is useful to explore this. Different cultures have different ways of constructing the self. Paul is not the product of the introspective cultures of the west, (and he is not an example of them), but of the other-centred-cultures of the ancient world (still the basic model of most of our third world, indeed of our actual world). In the ancient world, the recipient of a gift must return a gift of equal or greater value. The recipient of patronage is incapable of doing this, but rather, must return loyalty and ascribed honour. The gods were seen as the chief patrons in every religion, and the client's response to them (loyalty and honour) is called religion. Patrons did recruit clients. The client's expected response is prayer, praise, and proselytism. You could interpret Paul's received vision as a benefaction from his God. His client response would be his 'mission to Jews and Gentiles'. He is then the supervisor of God's enlarged estate. His way of honouring his God needs adjusting in the light of the revelation of Christ and his new understanding of God's relations with non-Jews. His patron, God, was asking something new and different from him. He was immediately aware he had to act differently.

I would prefer to read it differently. Perhaps Paul saw it less as a benefaction, than as an awakening to Reality. His response is not something he owes to a benefactor, it is rather something that is the only possible way of living in this revealed Reality. This lets him challenge the whole Roman system of patrons and clients and brokers.... He and everyone else and the risen-Crucified are all together in a co-living of the Reality....

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor thinks Paul had very little interest in philosophical concepts. He left that sort of thing to Apollos. He is a one-track man in many ways, and the ways are practical. The track is that of communion with the risen One. The practice is that of the community organizer. He says to himself: "Get out there and do it." He's the doer. He was never into the niceties of theory or having the correct words for it – well, if he ever did, it was an incidental. Words just tumbled out of him, and he would never have committed himself to the same words ten minutes later. We've got stuck on his exact exegetical meaning and we've often missed the man because of that. We've often used him as a kind of support system for certain forms of holiness to which he was totally opposed.

It is true that many Jews have called him an 'apostate' from Judaism. I do not think he was. Max Scheler said that an apostate does not affirm his new convictions for their own sake, but is engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past. Paul was not like that...and never did that.

The new experience really comes through to Paul, I think, as the unintended and unexpected climax of what Israel was all about, and he thinks that by living like this now, he would be for the first time a true and real Jew. That's how he sees even the **risen** Christ. The *christos estauromenos* is a true Jew. Jesus doesn't lose his Jewishness in the resurrection by any means. Neither did Paul nor the other Jews. We didn't have any Jewishness before, as ethnic pagans, but somehow we are swept up into the final, eschatological meaning of Israel in our participation in the resurrection of Jesus the Jew.

That is what dawned on Paul as a result of the Damascus Road experience. He knew that the Crucified Risen One was the answer to all this. He knew there was a Life beyond all the distortions around him. He knew there was a dynamic present in the universe that could subvert every Empire and patronage. That could bring it a different kind of justice, and a different kind of peace. As long as people knew. So he realized it was his vocation, his mission, to **go out and show/tell them, any place, all the time.** And to gather them into **little groups who would live a different politics of inclusiveness, and would subvert every Imperial World as a result.**

Paul was hit on the head by too much too quickly on the road to Damascus. He really spent the rest of his life trying to figure out the implications. There's not much more in his theology anywhere than this. It not just begins there, but is really almost fully contained there. He works out applications and tangents in the contingent situations of his communities. He works out other ways of saying it. He figures his way around a few concepts that make sense to think about it in. But he doesn't get another new idea. Perhaps there are one or two 'new' ideas towards the end of his life – but substantially it's nearly all there from the beginning. He cannot be what he used to be.

A CHANGE IN THE CHARACTER OF SUFFERING

Paul suffered because of the inroads of resurrection into his existence. This suffering was acute, but not unresolvable. It was continually being included in the risenness of Jesus. The political side of it is seen as more important than what we might be tempted to call the 'spiritual' side. The political value of believing and living like that, is that whatever the Roman system does to little people in kicking them around and making them hurt, you can pick up every one of those hurts and sublimate it and include it into a positivity that the Romans can never take away. That's eventually the defeat of every totalitarian system, without having taken up arms against it. It's a

new version of politics, if you still call it politics. It's an open *politeia* – a coming together. It's a citizenship in resurrection of everybody that is oppressed by totalitarian structures, and the political value of it is almost the primary thing that dawned on Paul. Paul didn't want to write a theology textbook about the risen Christ at all. He wanted to get out there and do it.

What he realizes, if you like, about resurrection, is that it's not one instant - Easter is not one moment one Easter Sunday. It is a process. It's a whole period. It's all of history from now on. This new resurrectional, inclusive-of-crucifixion politics is against, and healing of, all forms of violence and injustice and all claims to superiority. So there can never be a situation of inferiority again. Paul believes it is incredibly real, in front of him, talking to him, it's a very new stage in human history. He calls it later on "a new creation". It's as though God has created the world again and the rules are different. It's like somebody saying today we've got a new physics and the rules are different. But it really is that kind of thing. The whole notion of relational gentleness and a pervasive presence – it's no longer a nice, vague piece of psychology. It's a very tangible, earthy, real, getting down to the kicked-around people thing, and it gentles away all the differences between life and death. And once you gentle away that difference, you'll gentle away any other differences as well. You could never have any serious differences after that point.

Paul needed time afterwards to get over it. He never got over it, but he needed time to cope with it. The Acts have him going to talk with Ananias, and then he gets lost in the desert for a while – it might have been a very good idea - until he could get some kind of coherence in putting some sort of statement about it – but it was literally overwhelming.

AND THE EMPIRE?

What about his relationship with the Roman Empire? There was a valley-plain near Philippi, where two great battles occurred before Paul's time – but not long before – that determined the nature of civilization in the western world and the Roman Empire, and finally Octavian became the divine Augustus and so on. I think the road to Damascus is an even more important place in the history of civilization, not just in the history of holiness, or the church or Christianity, but in the history of Israel and in the history of the world. Paul realized that the name of the game is not peace through victory (of one side of a binary set over the other). It is peace through God's remarkable way of including everything together. And his simple formula – taken from the psalms - for that is the justice of God.

The justice of God is not human justice. What Paul means by the justice of God is **what God is bound to as God in God's kind of justice**. What God is bound to as God is **to be bountiful**. God is bound to be so bountiful that God is all-inclusive of everybody – death into life, and everything else into positivity. **Peace** through that sort of God-boundness-to-bounty is a much more beautiful concept than the Roman one. It is exactly what **Covenant** means. That is exactly why non-violence is too weak a term. It is the sublation of all violence into a big gentleness – into an open presence of love. It is an equality in respect and love for everything and everybody. Even the word 'peace' mightn't be the right word, unless it is given a deeper meaning. The Romans have wrecked the word 'peace' and used it wrongly. Paul is using it rightly, but it is a very, very different set of perceptions implied. It is even saying: "Give me all the dominative systems and practices in the whole universe and I'll sublimate the lot." Tell me about all the gods there ever were, and my God has shown in raising Jesus that the real God is like none of them. God is of a different order.

Does that hit out against the dualism of Hellenistic thought? Yes. But rather than 'hit out', it picks up on the beautiful Greek need to establish political community for everybody, something they did all around the cities of Greece. Paul would say they had the right idea but didn't know how to achieve it. And the only one who knew how to do it was God, and God did it in the resurrection of Jesus, which is the start of a resurrection process in all of us.

And then Paul says: "It's actually happening now. And it's subverting the Roman Empire now." I think he would probably say that if you are not subverting some politically dominative system like the Roman Empire, you are not really true Christians. You are only dreaming about it at home and having nice spiritual thoughts. That may sound fairly heretical but it's like saying: I don't know whether I'm right wing or left wing, but I'm not playing on that kind of arena. I'm playing on a much bigger one, and the team I'm playing with is another sort of team altogether.

RESURRECTION IN A SARDINE SHOP

I think I could imagine, if I am allowed to be a bit imaginative, what some people would say to Paul, perhaps later on in his life, perhaps in Corinth. Some of them in Corinth were hard-headed types. They were not going to buy anything just because Paul said it and they were saying to him: "Paul, where's the evidence that this is really happening?" And Paul would look up from his work in the leather goods shop, where he was sewing tents together, or something, and he would say:

"There's **a sardine shop** down the street on the corner, and they open for business each morning, but before they open up, there's a few of us gather there every morning, and we gather for what you probably call prayer, only the word prayer means something different for us than for you. We just gather to be together and to be open to one another. Once a week we gather there and we have a longer meeting – and at that meeting we bring half of all we've earned during the previous week, and we give it to everybody and we bring all the food we've got at home and we share it together – and what's left over, which is usually most of it, we take down the street to various people that we know haven't got enough food. It is the opposite of an elite club-gathering in the Empire. And we do that because we believe all creation is touched by resurrection and all the fruits of our work are touched by it – all our food is touched by it and it all belongs to the risen and rising one. And it has to be handed out to everybody who's included in that dynamic. There is a dynamic at work in the world to distribute everything in God's kind of 'bound-to-be-bountiful' justice. And that's the exact opposite of the Empire. And that's what we're doing."

And Paul would go on to say: "By the way, there are little groups like the one in the sardine shop, all over the place, in every city of the Empire – and there are lots of sardine shops – and they are everywhere - and that means the Empire is finished in principle. And so are patrons and brokers and clients."

Paul was particularly good in pointing to evidence like that. It really is a very powerful living of the belief. One of the troubles today is that we've got a church that talks about resurrection and celebrates it liturgically but does little or nothing about it in reality or politically. The practical model of living that Paul wants, is not top-down with patrons, brokers and clients, if you're lucky, and left-outs, if you're unlucky. The practical model is not even bottom-up, with the losers agitating to get on top. It's everybody on equal terms, and, for the first time in existence, you have a level playing field. And it is level, and everybody is on equal terms. Can you see the

vision of the man? If you can, you have seen something of what he saw on the Road to Damascus.

It maybe superfluous, but let me say it: this was not some theory that dawned on Paul – it was a reality that met him and captured him. Real life was actually this real way. From then on, Paul could live no other way.

WHO DID PAUL TELL?

Who did Paul tell this to, or take this to? Did he take it to the Jews? They would have said: “Oh, come on Paul. General resurrection isn’t around. Even though we believe in one and hope for one and pray for one. It hasn’t happened yet.” Did he take it to the Romans involved in Emperor worship? They would have said: “Come on! Settle for the Pax Romana. Augustus and his successors are here seemingly forever.” They wouldn’t have taken him too seriously either. There was a theory in some of the books that he went to the Jews first, and they wouldn’t listen to him, so he went to the pagans then. I don’t think that’s quite true. What is becoming clearer is that there were some Gentiles, who had come to believe in the God of Israel, without becoming card-carrying Jews. In other words they had not been circumcised. They were hanging around the synagogues because they believed in everything the Jews believed in. They just didn’t feel politically or ritually they could join the Jewish group. We have from archeological data, the names of many of these people. In various places they are numerous and they are from important positions in society and civic life. They are a significant group. Sometimes they are called **God-worshippers**; sometimes they are called **God-fearers** – **hangers on**, would probably be a reasonably modern translation. The Jews wanted them to become real Jews or not be around. The Romans wanted them to give up hanging around Jewish religious centres and get back into decent Roman polytheistic Emperor worship. Paul told them there was no need to do either. **Just come to the sardine shop.** And I think they are his special audience. I think they are the ones he primarily goes to – others not being excluded, of course. He wouldn’t exclude anyone. But I don’t think he goes primarily to the synagogue to convert Jews. I think he goes to the synagogue because this crowd is hanging around the synagogue. He’s not directly sent in terms of his key experience to convert Jews or to convert pagans. But he realizes that his best chances are going to be with the God-worshippers. They are the middle term in the equation, I think. They are the ones who mostly understood him and bought him. And there were some others too, of course. But I think they are the ones he was primarily targeting.

When I say Paul went, he went with **a sense of vocation and mission**. But vocation is a doubtful word. These days we use it in different and strange contexts. We ask are people suitable and do they have the right intention for ‘ministry’. Paul was definitely unsuitable for it, given his background. I doubt if he had the right intention before his experience of resurrection. So ‘vocation’ becomes perhaps not so useful. The **key point** is that **it was the God of resurrection dynamics that sent him**. No human being sent him. No Christian group sent him. Neither Peter nor James sent him. None of the twelve apostles sent him, although they took keen interest in what he was up to, and often didn’t like it, and they supervised him, if you want to use that word. But they are not the source of his mission. He is quite special because his mission is directly and immediately through God apocalypting the risenness of Jesus in him. And that always was his claim and it was always the reason why he felt exempt from their control. And they never quite bought that. They wanted to reduce him to one of the hired helpers in the system that they had put up. This call in Paul is of *christos estauromenos* origin. It’s the breath of a different God.

Some people wonder how much Paul knew about the historical Jesus. I don't think he had much knowledge about Jesus. I don't think he would have known many details of the historical life of Jesus. In a strange, yet not so strange, way I don't think he was very concerned to find out. I don't think he did a 3-year course on the historical Jesus before he went on his mission. Until Jesus is killed and crucified and subsumed into resurrected life, Paul wasn't even interested in Jesus. That's early stuff for Paul. What hits him in the Damascus experience is the sublation of all the sufferings and crucified side of Jesus into a life that is inclusive of all, and yet gentling and beautifying it all. I think it took Paul the rest of his life, and maybe even then he didn't get it all completely right, to figure out what that meant about the way he lived. I think the germ of vision, and the grasp of an insight, is there from then on. He probably would have been about his late thirties at the time. He was probably born about 6 bce. It's got to be about three years after the crucifixion, in the year 33 or somewhere there, give or take a few years. Maybe it was like a mid-life crisis. But it's a bit more than most of them.

I find it a little intriguing that it was on the road to Damascus, that that incident clearly took place. Damascus is the oldest city in the world (in that sense of cities). It goes back to the third millennium bce. Paul is a mover, a traveller, by instinct and nature. He is very different from Jesus, who hardly moves fifteen miles from where he was born. Damascus is the meeting point of all the trade routes, from India, through Yemen, and to the Mediterranean and up to Turkey – they'd all go through Damascus. So, in a sense, the world converged on this place, and history converged on this moment, and it **is** quite special, and Paul is extraordinarily special. He was taken up into the 'christos estauromenos'. So will the world be, one day, thanks to Paul.

READINGS

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L.Reed, *Bodily resurrection*, in *In Search of Paul*, pp.133-135; and "We belong to the Day", *ibid.*, pp.172-174.

Note: a series on Paul for this year of Paul, in [Thinking Faith](#), the online journal of the British Jesuits:

Peter Edmonds, s.j., *Who was Saint Paul?*

Rt Rev John Arnold, *The long road to Damascus*

Nick King, s.j., *The vision of saint Paul*

David M.Neuhaus, s.j., *Getting to know Saint Paul today: A changing paradigm*

Also: [America Magazine](#) (November 10 2008), from the New York Jesuits, has an entire issue on 'The Legacy of Paul':

John R. Donohue, *Model of Persuasion: pastoral theology and practice in Paul's letters.*

John J. Kilgallen, *A Complicated Apostle: what sort of person was Saint Paul?*

Barbara Reid, *Women and Paul: was Paul an egalitarian or a chauvinist?*

John C.Endres, *In his Shoes: a pilgrim's guide to some Pauline sites in Turkey.*