

5 Lent  
March 21, 2010  
Fr. Bill McGinty

## **“An Invitation to Transformation”**

Paul in the second reading today says: “I want to know Christ.” Paul grew up in Tarsus a town in Asia Minor. It was an important place, because it had a Roman Garrison with several legends. Tarsus straddled a crossroads on an important trade route that went east to Bagdad and south to Jerusalem and on to Egypt. Paul belongs to the “Diaspora” a name given to Jews who lived outside of Palestine, in towns and cities across the Roman Empire. It also made him a different kind of Jew. He was zealous, knowledgeable and committed. Paul was Roman educated and had studied Greek and Greek philosophy. At 16, he was sent to Jerusalem to study in Rabbinic school, where he became an expert in Judaic law. He graduated and immediately was accepted into the Pharisee party. By the time of Jesus’ death, in 29AD, Paul was a rising star in the Sanhedrin and in Judaic government.

You can imagine the shock some years later, when it was learned that on a trip to Damascus in Syria, Paul had defected and become a Christian. He then totally disappeared from sight, for a complete 10 years.

All through his missionary career, Paul seems to battle for recognition. No one seems to want to acknowledge him as an Apostle, like any one of the other 12. Perhaps, it is because he had never known Jesus in the flesh. However, Paul had been transformed. He is no longer the headstrong young Pharisee, who sees Christianity as a threat to his believed Judaism.

But it is not only Paul who is transformed by his encounter with Christ, the Apostles themselves are not the same people who naively followed Jesus from the shores of the Sea of Galilee, to transverse the countryside of Galilee north and south, east and west. The Apostles had four clear experiences; first they heard this young Rabbi teach and preach to the crowds at first hand; second, they witnessed Jesus healing the sick, performing miracles and raising up the lowly; third, they each had a personal relationship with Christ that extended into long dialogues with him around campfires each evening; and fourth and last, they saw the reaction of people to his message when he sent them out into the towns and villages to preach and teach his word.

The Pentecost Apostles are not the same people they were three years prior. Like Paul they go on to be evangelists, leaders, founders of churches, and other Christ's has to far flung communities. Their renewal and transformation is complete.

On Thursday, March 18 both of our bishops, Diocesan staff, the Standing Committee, Diocesan Council and the Committee for Congregational Development met at Kingston, to discuss the two documents: "The status of the church in the Diocese of Bethlehem" and the Congregational Development document "from risk to opportunities."

Bishop Paul began, by saying that he has seven to ten good years left in his episcopate and that this meeting and its outcome may well define his entire work as Bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem.

On these two documents rests the Challenge to sit back and watch the slow decline of our parishes or to take up the challenge of "from risk to opportunities" and begin a renewal and transformation of the Diocese that will have long lasting effects for parishes and the next generation.

Anne Fitch, a priest on diocesan staff, told the Assembly: "We need more than a plan; we need more than a program of recovery. We need a culture shift, whereby we begin by re-defining who we are as Episcopalians, and have a certainty about our identity and what we are about. We will only do that when we have a common vision."

Fr. Dan Gunn, a young priest from Wilkes Barre, told the Assembly: "In my church, the people have told me, that they want strong leadership. I asked them: "Who do you mean?" They said: "You." I told them: "I agree we need strong leadership, but that leadership needs to come from you. It needs to come from the pews. I am only the catalyst. You are the people with talent in every field of business and career. If we can harness that strength, if we can tap into that ability, then we will forge a leadership that will propel the church forward into the future and for two years."

Fr. Bill Llewellys, now retired and sick with cancer, rose to tell us all: "There are two words needed for this campaign "Renewal and Transformation." As I look around the diocese from Bethlehem to Milford and from Douglasville to Scranton, I cannot help but notice that recovery and success in parishes is about more than money and budgets; it is about transformation it is about the renewal of the heart; where good people led by a good leader, decide that it is time for change. It is time to move to save and value, all that they love about their church. That transformation occurs when individuals say to themselves: "I cannot leave this to anyone else to do. My

Christ calls me to do it.” That transformation, happens when the Christ we talk to in our heart and prayers is the same Christ we respond to in the mission and ministry of our church. When that spirit pervades a church, clergy, vestry and people are of one mind, and then they become an unstoppable force, for renewal and transformation.”

Fr. John Francis, from Christ Church Reading rose to say that he has belonged to three dioceses and never before, has he witnessed a group of people come together so galvanized to effect changes and so together in spirit that they can change a diocese, lift up parishes and make something happen that will be truly historic.

After three hours, these august bodies passed a motion to begin a process that will step transform this diocese. From the Diocesan staff to the smallest parishes, leaders from clergy and lay will be sought out, trained and sent out to pour new life, hope, and the ways and means to bring recovery.

Writing to Bishop Paul two weeks ago, I told him of the strength and depth of talent that exists in our present Vestry and of the great things that they are doing in the church, the worship and outreach ministries.

I also told him that no one on the vestry, me included, believes that property, improvements, financial strength or even music and worship are enough to classify the mission of our parish as being successful. “For that to happen,” I said, “The strength of our resolve must lie in the commitment of each parishioner, to deepen their faith and live what they believe.”

That happens when it is no longer the clergy person, who is telling us about the importance of Evangelism, prayer, attendance and our service to others, it happens when we all tell ourselves these things.

In turn, Bishop Paul wrote back to me on March 11<sup>th</sup> and I shared some of what he had to say about the parish to the vestry at last Monday’s vestry meeting. The Senior Warden asked me at that meeting to share some of what the Bishop said to me. This is from the Bishops letter March 11<sup>th</sup>.

“I can remember traveling north to be with you all in 2005 with Susana Delaney’s White Paper in hand. If my memory serves me well, I was sick at the time. The White Paper promised a full time rectorship, something close to my heart for Milford. I remain grateful for the energy and enthusiasm you and your people have given to your ministry in Milford. Few priests have done what you have and few congregations have followed their priests with the same enthusiasm into ministry. You all have my continued admiration and respect.” Faithfully yours, Bishop Paul+

We all know that our work here is not yet finished, but we also know that we sit at a crossroads of opportunity. What we have done here in Milford, has been so widely admired, that others, not ourselves, have suggested that we may be able to help in the renewal and transformation of other parishes. Fr. Charles Cesaretti, heard of the congregation development committee, and the man the bishop has appointed to lead the campaign, wrote to me yesterday to say: "The key that will turn the lock to renewal and transformation, is responsibility and accountability. We need to groom leaders in parishes, between parishes, and the diocese that are clear about our responsibilities and accountably to each other. You and your congregation have walked down this road already. Consider that members of your parish play a major part in the process as we move ahead. I am deeply grateful for their prayers and support in these most important times in the "history of our diocese."

All of this takes us back to today's readings and St Paul. His life as a Pharisee, a lawyer and a leader in Judaism is over. All his bridges have been washed away; all that is left is Jesus Christ. Apart from the very few cradle Episcopalians in our midst, that is our story also. This is now home. This is where we have all dropped anchor. The transformation we have all sought in our life has brought us all here. In a few weeks, Jesus leads us to a spiritual transformation in dying with him to our old self and the incitation to resurrect ourselves anew on Easter Sunday.

Renewal and transformation, no matter how old or young we may be, is the stuff that builds Christ Kingdom and binds us all together as church. Let us go into Holy Week with a spirit of optimism and enthusiasm and pray for one another, our parish and our diocese.

Amen+