

## **SJW – Conversion of Paul – 25 Jan 2026**

May I speak in the name of God, +Father, +Son and +Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the difference between St Paul and Donald J Trump?

One is thought by many to be a misogynistic homophobe ...

...and the other is the president of the United States.

I'd better explain myself. I can well remember the first of a series of lectures on Paul during my training, where we were asked to give our initial impressions of him, and even among theological students there was a lot of hesitation, embarrassment, negativity, and even some hostility. 'Male chauvinist', 'misogynist' and 'homophobe' were all mentioned - not surprising in a broadly liberal catholic college especially with the balance of female and male students we had. Others were concerned that in some circles, Paul's teachings were given greater prominence than those of Jesus. Nicholas King, a Jesuit priest and academic in Oxford, encountering similar negativity among students wrote a book which was originally going to be called '*St Paul for those who hate St Paul*' but its final title was taken from a story which he recounts of:

*‘a nineteenth century American woman who had been born a slave. She could not read but her children used to read the Bible to her, since she was a Christian and she loved the Bible. The only exception was when they suggested she might like to hear something from St Paul. Her response was invariable: ‘Not that man!’<sup>1</sup>*

Do you remember the 2013 film “12 Years a Slave”? It told the story of a black musician living in New York just prior to the American Civil War, who finds himself abducted and sold into slavery in the Deep South. It was a story made all the more harrowing by being based on truth. The many instances of extreme violence and random cruelty made me squirm, but the scenes which depressed me more than anything were those which showed how the white slave masters used the bible to justify what they were doing. I’m convinced that their reading of the bible was wilfully selective to the point of hypocrisy. They would relish reading passages such as: *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being*

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<sup>1</sup> Not that man! Restoring St Paul’s Reputation – Nicholas King p207

*watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.<sup>2</sup>*

However, their selective reading failed to include the next verse:

*And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.<sup>3</sup>*

words from the letter to the Ephesians but echoed almost verbatim in the letter to the Colossians. And from the letter to Titus:

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 6:5-8

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 6:9

*Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to answer back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity...<sup>4</sup>*

Down the centuries letters bearing Paul's name have proved fertile ground for those who wanted to justify the owning of slaves. It's no wonder that the former slave woman that Nicholas King quotes did not have any time for the writings of St. Paul. But it's not only what was written about slaves that has caused controversy over the years. Take these instructions to wives, again from the letter to the Ephesians:

*Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.<sup>5</sup>*

Or take Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church:

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<sup>4</sup> Titus 2.9-10

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 5.22-24

*As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.<sup>6</sup>*

Similarly from the first letter to Timothy

*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.<sup>7</sup>*

These letters have also proved fertile ground for those who wanted to justify male superiority in all fields of human endeavour including the church.

I won't list what can be found in the writings that bear Paul's name about sexual orientation and practice save to say that they too have proved fertile ground for those who wanted to justify the persecution of homosexuals.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 14.33b-35

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 2.11-12

You can understand then, why many people find Paul troublesome. His apparent tolerance of slavery, his views on women and on homosexuality make a lot of people, Christians included, very uncomfortable. I wonder how many of us feel that way. Whenever Paul is mentioned do we say to ourselves ‘Not that man!’?

And yet Paul is revered as one of the greatest theologians of the Christian Church. As here at St James, the feast day of his conversion is being celebrated in many churches around the world today, many of them dedicated to him as their patron saint. Many still hold to the once universal belief that, of the 27 books that make up the New Testament, Paul personally wrote 13 of them – letters to churches and individuals. However, modern scholarship casts doubt on the authenticity of almost half of them.

So, what then are we celebrating today on this the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul? Well, many people credit Paul with the fact that there is a Christian Church at all. The most significant player in the Acts of the Apostles is undoubtedly

Paul and his untiring efforts to take the gospel to the known world. He must have been a driven man.

That drive was evident in the years immediately after Jesus's death when he hunted down those who claimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead – the followers of The Way as they were known at the time. As he confessed to the Galatians:

*You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.<sup>8</sup>*

If anything, his Damascus Road experience that we heard about in our reading redoubled that zeal – this time in supporting the preaching of the gospel to the Gentile world. But drive and zeal are only admirable if they are directed in support of good ends which makes his apparent views on

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<sup>8</sup> Galatians 1.13-14

slaves, women and same-sex attraction appear all the more troubling to many modern readers. So can we rescue Paul from those claims of ‘chauvinism’, ‘misogyny’ and ‘homophobia’ and if so, how?

Well, I’ve hinted earlier to the widely held belief among Pauline scholars that Paul was not the author of many of the letters that bear his name – including the letters from which most of the offending passages were quoted – the letters to the Ephesians, to the Colossians, to Titus and both letters to Timothy. These are letters written ‘in the style of’ or ‘from the school of’ Paul. We can’t be sure to what extent they reflect Paul’s own thoughts.

However there is no argument over the authenticity of the letters to the Corinthians, the first of which directs women to be silent in church. It has often been pointed out that Paul was writing to a specific church about a specific problem and that he would probably be somewhat bemused by the fact that we are still reading it today, identifying it as scripture, and trying to draw universal and eternal conclusions from it.

I've also hinted that certain passages have been read very selectively stopping just short of the point when Paul (or those writing in his name) goes on to make a balancing point. For instance in Ephesians, wives having been told to be subject to their husbands we then hear:

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,*

But there are also passages where Paul makes it clear that everything should be reciprocated:

*Let the man give to the woman what is her due; and likewise the woman to the man. The woman does not have authority over her own body but the man does. Likewise the man does not have authority over his own body but the woman does. Don't deprive one another except by agreement for a time, in order to have leisure for prayer, and then come back together again,<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 7.3-5 Nicholas King's translation in *Not that man! Restoring St Paul's Reputation* – Nicholas King p229

And if you ever doubt Paul's underlying position of the equality of all in Christ then we do well to remember this famous passage from his letter to the Galatians:

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

*There is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>10</sup>*

That passage has sustained many in their various campaigns – including for the abolition of slavery, and the fight for both gender and racial equality.

This coming Wednesday is a momentous day for the Church of England when the Right Reverend Dame Sarah Mullally is installed as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury - the first woman to hold that role. Many have used the writings in Paul's name to oppose women priests, and women bishops

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<sup>10</sup> Galatians 3.27-28

and many will continue to do so. I, for one, give thanks that the Church of England is on the verge of making such a symbolic gesture that this particular injustice is a thing of the past.

And I pray that it will not be the last. There is much work still to be done in the area of same-sex relationships.

So, if like me, in the past, you have been lukewarm or dismissive about Paul, then I urge you to cut him some slack, read him more sympathetically; perhaps read Nicholas King's challenging book or a similar commentary. Perhaps you will experience your own Damascus Road conversion.

So this morning, let's give thanks for St Paul the author of one of the most inclusive statements of Christianity:

*[In Christ] there is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>11</sup>*

Amen