PAUL OF TARSUS

From Pharisee to Apostle
An Apostolic Journey

The Apostle Paul is maybe the most well known figure in the history of the Church. The aim of this talk is to try and understand better the Apostle of the Nations in his apostolic life-journey, a journey that leaves behind a deep-rooted Pharisee and discovers an Apostle, deeply committed to the Crucified and Risen Christ and to the pressing need to evangelize and bring the Good News to the furthest ends of the earth.

In the light of Paul's life and experience we may then ask ourselves: how can the Apostle of the Nations, so inflamed by the Gospel, enlighten our own evangelizing enthusiasm and ministry today?


It is with these words that Paul gives his identity to the Roman Tribune on the steps of the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem. Paul was born between the year 5 and 10 AD. “Circumcised on the eight day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Fil 3: 5-6).

Saul (Saul, Saulos, Paulus) was culturally formed according to the dictates of the Mishnah: at 5 he began reading the Scriptures, at 10 the Mishnah, at 13 he was obliged to observe the commandments and at 15 he was initiated to the reading and study of the Talmud. Besides Hebrew and Aramaic he was well-versed in Greek to read the Septuagint and well-trained to be a tent-maker (1 Tes 2: 9; 2 Tes 3: 8; 1 Cor 4: 12; Acts

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2 The New Testament presents us with two main sources to know Paul better, namely the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul. In the Book of Acts Luke devotes half of his book to Paul and his apostolic voyages and shows how Paul was chosen for a specific mission: to evangelize in the power of the Holy Spirit. Even if Acts is not the primary source to understand Paul’s life and message, having been written around the year 80 AD, it integrates well with what is found in the Pauline Corpus to have a deeper knowledge of the Apostle. The primary source for Paul’s life and message are his letters: they witness to the radical change brought into his life after experiencing Christ, his urge to evangelize and his pastoral concerns for the early Christian communities, many of which he founded himself together with his collaborators. The Letters are a treasure and can be considered as being an open dialogue of the Apostle and his Churches: they offer us direct contact with Paul’s personality, his different experiences, his message and his innermost being.

At 16 he was sent to Jerusalem and studied for four years at the feet of great, wise and moderate Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22: 3). He progressed immensely as a Pharisee, so much so that he took it upon himself to defend Judaism from the early Christian threat: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison... (Acts 22: 3-5; cfr: Gal 1, 13-14).

Between his formative years and Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7: 54-60) we know nothing on Paul's life. The only two considerations one can make is that Paul, notwithstanding his deep-rooted Judaism, apparently did not marry; it is probable that Paul left Jerusalem before Jesus' public ministry and therefore he never met Jesus before his experience on the road to Damascus.

2. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9: 5).

Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is the most important in his life (cfr: Acts 9: 1-19; 22: 4-16; 26: 12-18; Gal 1: 5-17). In his letters the Apostle never speaks directly about this experience but it underlies all he writes and expresses. It was the experience that changed his life radically. It is not an isolated experience in his life: God was always present in his existence and led him from his mother's womb. The Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul speak about this experience in the light of the Gospel. In Gal 1: 15-16 thee experience is firmly rooted in his apostolic vocation: “But when God who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles”.

The same is expressed in Acts: after Paul's vision of the Christ, he receives a prophetic mandate to proclaim and witness to Jesus (Acts 26: 17-18) before the Gentiles, kings and the sons of Israel (Acts 9: 15). It is therefore the Gospel that transforms Paul and changes him from a zealous Jew into an authentic Christian, a missionary and an apostle full of enthusiasm, a prophetic witness of the Risen Lord.

The change in Paul is radical: his communion with Christ creates a qualitatively and radically new person: “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation, the old order has passed away and the behold the new has come” (2 Cor 5: 17). Paul has been enlightened by the Christ: “For it is God who said. 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4: 6). The Cross of Christ, and not the Law of Moses anymore, became his boast (Gal 6: 14).

In his Damascus experience Paul sees the fullness of his existence in which “Christ Jesus has me his own” (Phil 3: 12). God transforms Paul's existence and the meaning of his life: “Yet whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.
More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3: 7-11).

It is in the love for Christ that we acquire the key to understand this experience of Paul, an experience that transformed him into a zealous apostle committed in love to the Crucified and Risen Savior and Lord.

3. “I went away at once into Arabia, and afterward I returned to Damascus” (Gal 1: 17).

After the life-changing experience on the road to the Damascus, it is very probable that Paul retreated to the semi-desert region of Arabia. Saint Jerome writes that Paul retreated to this region to reflect and deepen his calling and the tremendous experience on the road to Damascus. It was the moment in which Paul could reflect on the Lord Jesus, grow in his relationship to the Risen Lord, and understand Jesus in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures he knew so well. Paul also refers to this experience to enhance his autonomy as an apostle.

Back in Damascus “he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying. 'He is the Son of God”’ (Acts 9: 20). Paul's preaching caused an initial reaction: “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal 1: 23-24). Paul's life-changing experience and initial apostolate enraged his fellow Jews, so much so that they decided to kill him. “But their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket” (Acts 9: 23-25; cf: 2 Cor 11:33).

Three years had passed since Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. We are around the years 37-39 AD when Paul goes to Jerusalem to meet Cephas and stay with him for 15 days. (Gal 1: 18; Acts 9: 26). The biblical text does not say what the two apostles discussed: it is possible that Paul shared his Damascus experience and his apostolic call whereas peter shared his witness of the the historical Jesus. With this visit paul comes into direct contact with the one who was considered as being the head of the Christian community (cfr: Acts 12: 1-20; Gal 2: 8-9) and the Mother-Church in Jerusalem. Paul was greatly helped by Barnabas (Acts 9, 27), a probable disciple-companion under Rabbi Gamaliel.

In Jerusalem Paul spoke boldly in the name of the Lord; again he was threatened
with death. “When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus” (Acts 9: 30). Paul used this relatively long period to preach the Gospel in the Roman Province of Syria and Cilicia (cfr: Gal 1, 21-24), a preaching that becomes an occasion for the the churches in Judea to glorify God.

Barnabas, sent to organise the Christian community in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11: 19-24), calls Paul to be work with him. Their collaboration was to become the basis of a wider missionary project in Asia Minor and the Mediterranean Basin.

4. “Christ sent me to proclaim the Gospel” (cfr: 2 Cor 1: 17).

Paul's missionary voyages are well documented in the Acts of the Apostles: the three voyages express Paul's evangelizing urge that led him from Antioch in Syria to Cyprus, the cities of Asia Minor and Greece, towards Rome and maybe also Spain. The missionary voyages were aided by the specific political and cultural context of Greece, Asia Minor and the East of Paul's time: it was the time of an expanding Hellenistic culture and Roman military might. Paul takes advantage of the the Pax Romana and the fact that he could speak Greek well, having also a deep-rooted knowledge of the religious and cultural milieu of his time. The facility in traveling on the Roman roads and seafaring, notwithstanding all the practical difficulties, aided Paul in becoming the expression of the early Church's missionary zeal.

“I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish – hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith: as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'” (Rom 1: 14-17).

5. “They laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13, 3).


It was in the Spring of the year 45 AD, during a liturgical celebration, when Paul and Barnabas are commissioned for the mission amongst the Gentiles. Barnabas, Paul and John Mark evangelize across the island of Cyprus till Paphos. Notwithstanding the opposition of the magician Elymas, the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus is converted to Christianity. From Paphos the missionary team travelled to Perga in Pamphylia right up to Antioch in Pisidia. Paul uses the firs sabbath to proclaim Jesus as the promised Messiah in the synagogue. “The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be
spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles”’ (Acts 13: 44-46). Notwithstanding persecution in Antioch of Pisidia, the mission proceeded to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Persecution became the hallmark of the evangelizing ministry! In Lystra Paul directs his proclamation to the Gentiles after having cured a cripple. Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city after the crowds were incited by Jews coming from Antioch and Iconium. The mission proceed to Derbe. “After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God.' And after the had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe” (Acts 14: 21-23).

It was Spring of the year 49 AD when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from where they had been sent: “When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time” (Acts 14: 27-28).

In Antioch Paul and Barnabas had to face the challenge poised by some Christians of Jewish origin who were insisting with the Gentile Christians that they observe the Law of Moses as a condition for salvation. Paul did not accept this: it would compromise “the truth of the Gospel” (Gal 2: 5). This would be confirmed in the Council of Jerusalem, when Peter, before the elders of the Jerusalem mother-Church and Paul and Barnabas, would declare: “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?. On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15: 10-11).

6. “He went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the Churches” (Acts 15: 41). The second missionary voyage – Acts 15: 36 – 18: 22. It is now Silas who is Paul's companion. Commended by the believers they set out to strengthen the Churches through Syria and Cilicia. It was in Lystra that Paul chooses the young Timothy to accompany him. “So the Churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16: 5).

Paul then decided to extend his mission and traveled to Phrygia and Galatia to reach the important cities of Proconsular Asia. Paul became sick and used this period to evangelize the region of Galatia (cfr: Gal 4: 13-14). In Troas he befriends Luke who becomes his companion. Led by the Spirit he travels to Macedonia and evangelizes in Philippi. Lydia and her family, together with the chief jailer and his family, become the
foundations of the Christian community in Philippi. Persecuted he goes to Thessalonica and notwithstanding persecution remains there for three months proclaiming the good news to the Jews and pagans. Those who received the Word of God let its fruit grow in them abundantly (cfr: 1 Thes 2: 13). Having to leave forcefully Thessalonica, Paul and his companions proceed to Beroea: “When they arrived the went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to sew whether these things were son. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing” (Acts 17: 11-12).

Waiting in Athens Paul argued in the synagogue and marketplace: “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Acts 17: 32-34).

In Corinth Paul teamed up with Aquila and Priscilla in tent-making; when Silas and Timothy arrived “every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18: 4-5). Paul's success in Corinth was great, notwithstanding the opposition of many Jews. Paul was encouraged by the Lord in a vision: “‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people’. He stayed there for a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18: 9-11). It was from Corinth that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Returning to Antioch he passed through Ephesus, promising to come again. It was Winter of the year 52 AD when Paul returns back to base after having widened his evangelising ministry throughout Macedonia and Achaia.

7. “He departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18: 23). The third missionary voyage – Acts 18: 23 – 20: 38. It was Spring of the year 53 AD when Paul begins his third missionary voyage. He preferred going overland to visit and strengthen the Christian communities in Galatia and Phrygia. He returns to Ephesus for 2 whole years; he would later describe his presence in Ephesus to the elders gathered in Miletus as being one of intense work (cfr: Acts 20: 17-28). “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19: 10). It was from here that Paul would strengthen his Churches by writing to the Corinthians and the Galatians. He probably was imprisoned briefly in Ephesus, an imprisonment that gave birth to the Letter to the Philippians. Leaving Ephesus he traveled to Philippi; here he again writes to the Corinthians. “When he had gone through those regions and
had given the believers much encouragement, he came to Greece, where he stayed for three months” (Acts 20: 3). It is from here that Paul writes his Letter to the Romans to prepare for his eventual visit to the Capital city of the Empire. After celebrating Easter in Philippi he proceeded to Troas. From Assos he sailed to Miletus.

8. “Serving the Lord with all humility” (Acts 20: 17-38). It is in Miletus that Paul speaks to the elders of the Church in Ephesus. He speaks from the heart. His speech is considered as being his Pastoral Farewell Address that expresses how the change he experienced on the road to Damascus had really made of him an intrepid Apostle, committed to the Lord and to his call to make known the Son of God to the nations.

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith toward our Lord Jesus. And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace...I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son...therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who sanctified. I coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example...When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed...”

Paul would witness to his call and to the Gospel throughout all the tribulations he would have to face right up to his martyrdom (cfr: Acts 22: 6-21; 23, 6-11; 24: 10-21; 26: 1-23; 28: 1-10). Acts concludes presenting Paul proclaiming the good news: “He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcome all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28: 30-31).

9. “I pray that...Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3, 17). Ephesians 3 is a wonderful expression of Paul apostolic journey: “...for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the
mystery was made know to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generation this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made know to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly place. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.” (Col 3: 2-13).

Wonderful is Paul’s prayer here, a prayer that expresses what he himself experience and what he desired that all believers experience in their situation as new creatures in Christ: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Col 3: 14-21). On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15: 10-11).

10. “And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up” (Acts 20: 32). What does Paul teach us in the light of his apostolic journey? Is there anything specific that really can enlighten our ministry, also in our parishes, in the context of the New Evangelization and the Year of Faith?

Marcello Ghirlando OFM