

One Hundred And Eighty Degrees

This common phrase defines what the Bible means by “conversion”. Religious conversion is not a slight change of direction or a small downward pressure on the wheel of your life. That would really be a boring idea; and when people say they find religion boring, it’s because that’s what they think it’s like. It’s a nice people’s game, religion. They get together in a Nice People’s Club - church - and they make minor modifications as they go on through their nice lives, getting that little bit nicer each day until they die. And then they go to heaven for a really nice time. If you hear the tones of Ned Flanders in what I say, go ahead. Making a good life even better. It makes you yawn? Good, me too.

Refuge Of Sinners

The signs are that Jesus of Nazareth hadn’t much of a soft spot for nice people. He wasn’t interested; he said: *I haven’t come for the healthy, but for the sick*. This wasn’t something he had to struggle towards. He actually liked the company of honest sinners better than people trying for niceness. He seemed to find the formal garden of Pharisee life faintly ridiculous, with its hundreds of fads and regulations. Much of it looks like the compulsive-obsessive behaviour we often suffer from: there are people who feel dirty all day, and have to keep scrubbing their hands like Lady Macbeth; Pharisees would have had something to offer them. The point is that all the scrubbing in the world won’t do the trick, and neither did all those Pharisee regulations. Jesus wanted to cut the cackle and talk truth. I’m not quite sure that Jesus was a refuge *for* sinners; I often feel he was taking refuge *among* the sinners to get away from the Holy Joes.

No Contest

Jesus didn’t want to win in the piety stakes. He never joined that competition for new forms of clean living and Law-abiding. That’s why he represents something entirely radical amongst religious offers: a conversion, a total volte-face on what had gone before. The recruits were surprising: the fishermen, a few outcasts, some women, lepers, demoniacs, tax-farmers. At first sight, a mob no-one significant would want to join: certainly no threat to powerful parties. But that gradually changed. The powerful began to feel his power, and then to feel threatened by him.

Soon they were talking of the Temple being in peril, and the Romans becoming alerted to dangerous talk. Whatever you may think, no-one found *this* religion boring. Clearly it would all end in tears, with blood on the floor. The authorities knew that, and settled for the least possible amount of blood: the elimination of the leader, they thought, would be just the ticket.

The Toughest Conversion

Jesus had symbolised his radical view of religion by many signs. Reconciling the leper and the outcast and the possessed, opening the eyes of the blind, raising the dead: these are all 180° turns, reversals of fortune and of understanding which made life explode out of death. But now he was faced with the most total of challenges: Church and State united against him, ready to use total warfare on him. He would be blacked and rejected in the fullest way, held up for all to see as a man unfit to belong to the human race, worthy of the curse of everyone, decent or indecent. It was here that the radical rabbi with the talent for miracles showed himself to be something else. He would be condemned for different things by different people: by the priests for blasphemy, and for endangering the compromises they had made to preserve the Temple. By the Romans, he would be killed as the easy way of placating the priests, and to minimise the fear of a Passover riot. In a way, both of these verdicts would tell truth about Jesus. His “blasphemy” was real, except for the fact that it was true; if “God has become human” is blasphemous, it is also the truth, scandalous and explosive as that may be. Accepting this truth about Jesus Christ would also mean the end of the Old Testament, its sacrifices, its Temple and its priesthood: they were right to suggest that he would bring down the state as they knew it. They were in no doubt about the danger he posed. Of their actions, Jesus had to make sense, and respond truthfully.

The Divine Answer

The Resurrection is the answer of God to the Sanhedrin, the Roman Empire, the cry of the Jerusalem crowd, and the wretchedness of the stumbling disciples. Above all it is the Father’s eternal response to his Son: “he asked you for life, and this you have given to him”. May you share in his gift! *Fr Philip*