

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church. It's good to be back. Please join in our responsorial Psalm which is number 121 in your Black Psalter.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

Congregation:

My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved, he that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Congregation:

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

Congregation:

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil. He shall preserve thy soul.

Congregation:

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Choir:

(Singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, beginning at the 16th verse. "Jesus said to the twelve, 'See I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you'll be dragged before governors and kings because of me as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death and the father his child,

and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will all be hated because of my name." Here endeth the lesson.

Encouraging words through Jesus this morning. Today is the Feast of the Conversion of Paul. There's perhaps no more important figure in Christianity than Paul, besides maybe Jesus, and the way he's observed in the Church calendar is interesting. So most saints, we celebrate what we euphemistically call their heavenly birthday, which is the date of their death, the anniversary of their death. And we do that for Paul too, it's in late June. He shares the day with Peter, because by tradition they were meant to have died on the same day, although that's not likely.

So Paul has that day in June, but unlike most other saints, I think any other saint for the exception of Mary, he has an extra day. And so does Peter have an extra day, where we commemorate Paul's conversion. Last week, a week ago today, these are all separated by a week. Last week was the confession of Peter. We commemorate that in the calendar, and then today is the conversion of St. Paul.

As I said, Paul is foundational to Christian faith. You might say, in a manner of speaking, we don't really have an idea of who Jesus was or who Christ was before Paul. The earliest gospel accounts are written in the 70s maybe, early 70s AD or the Common Era. Paul was writing his letters in the 40s, 50s and died in the late 50s, early 60s. The gospels that were written were already informed by Paul's idea of Jesus, and Paul never knew Jesus in life. He came to know Jesus through his conversion, which is what we commemorate today.

There are two versions of the conversion account. The one that happens in the Book of Acts is quite dramatic. Paul is one of the persecutors of the Church. He sees the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen stoned. He casts a vote for Stephen's death and then watches while he's stoned. And is on his way to the Damascus, rallying capable to try to continue persecuting the Church. And on his way to the Damascus, a blinding light, a literally blinding light strikes him. He loses his vision for three days, but what he does see is Jesus telling him to stop persecuting the Church. And at the end of a Book of Acts, we see Paul talking to Agrippa, who is the son of Herod the King, and also to Festus, who was the governor and to Pontius Pilate a couple later, telling them the story of our Messiah.

That's Acts' version. The Book of Galatians, which is in Paul's own words, we're pretty sure Paul actually wrote that letter, gives a slightly different account. He is bonafide as a teacher of the law, and it says he was violently persecuting the Church and trying to destroy it. But then he says he had a revelation. He doesn't give details about that, but he says Jesus came to him and told him to do something else. And then, he went on his own to Arabia and Damascus, before finally going back to Jerusalem and meeting Peter and meeting James, and meeting those who knew Jesus in person. He did all this work, this evangelical work based upon his vision. And then Paul is arrested and taken to Rome and executed.

We have this passage from Matthew this morning, which is the passage the Church chooses for the observance of the conversion of St. Paul. And as I said, it's not an especially happy passage. And there's a trick to it too because it says, "Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say." Stephen doesn't worry in the Book of Acts. He stands up before the religious leaders and tells them what he thinks of Jesus, and it leads to his immediate execution with Paul watching. And then Paul knows exactly what to say. He says it in front of Festus and Agrippa, and it leads to his imprisonment, his extradition to Rome, shipwreck, further imprisonment in Rome, and then again, his execution.

It seems like we might have something to worry about. The point though, I think of what Jesus is saying or the point of these stories is what to worry about or where we should place our worry. If we worry about saying the thing that will save us, I'm not sure we have that thing to say, especially when we are faced with the sort of forces that Stephen and Paul are speaking to. So I'm not sure worrying is

worthwhile in that case. But what we don't need to worry about, I don't think, and this is what Jesus is saying, is what the truth is and what the content of our speech ought to be.

When given the opportunity to say who God is and what God wants, we know the answer. We've known it since the time of Jesus and Paul. We've known it since before them, because it's in the 61st chapter of the Book of Isaiah, which Paul trained as he was in the law, surely knew. "That when we are given to speak, we bring good news to the poor. We bind up the broken hearted. We proclaim liberty to the captives and release to prisoners. We proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We comfort all those who mourn. We give them a garland instead of ashes. We give them the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a failing spirit."

We know this is the truth. We know that speaking the truth especially in some cases, brings consequences, and that may be something to worry about. What we pray for this morning, as we remember Paul and the man he watched die, Stephen as well. What we pray for is not knowledge of that truth, but courage to speak it, when the moment to speak it comes.

I invite you please to rise to the prayers. The Lord with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. O God, by the preaching of Your Apostle Paul, You have caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant, we pray that we having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may show ourselves thankful to You by following his holy teaching through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God now and forever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Now we pray the words Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please now join me in singing that great hymn of conversion number 299, Amazing Grace.

Congregation:

(Singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

One short announcement before the final blessing. We will not have Men Cafe this morning. Our weekly coffee hour will start next week after Morning Prayers. I'll see you then for that. And now, may the Glory of God working in us do even more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God, from generation to generation, the Church and the Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.