

'Little One'

Paul Means 'Little One'

A couple of weeks ago at a conference hosted by the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, hundreds of young adults in Chicago were surprised by the presence of a special guest speaker, Jim Caviezel! Jim Caviezel as many of you know is the actor who played Jesus in the Passion of the Christ. He talked about how he felt God calling him to be an actor from a very young age and how the providence of God prompted Mel Gibson to select him to play Jesus because Jim's initials were JC and he was also 33 years of age.

What really struck me in his talk, was that he mentioned that the name Saul means 'great one' and Paul means 'little one' and that the shift in one single letter changed his whole identity. This is at the heart of our feast today.

The feast of the Conversion of St. Paul is about a shift in Paul's perspective from being 'great one' to becoming 'little one'.

What does it mean to be a 'great one' vs. 'little one'?

One day as I was running a 5km run, I was reflecting on the mystery of grace. I wondered, what is grace? Is it like those people on the side cheering me on giving me energy? Or is it like this music which is pumping me up? In some ways, those are analogies for actual grace which is like that spiritual boost to do the will of God. But when I thought about Jesus' words, "Apart from me you can do nothing," I realized, God's grace is more like the air I breathe. Just as we need to breathe in oxygen to live our natural life, so too we need the breath of God, the Spirit of God to give us grace to live our supernatural life as children of God. Grace is like heavenly, supernatural oxygen given by the Spirit which allows us to live in a state beyond our capacity.

To be a 'little one' means being one who is completely reliant upon the grace of God like we rely on air to breath. Someone who is a 'great one' FORGETS that they are in need of grace at every moment of their life and tend to rely on their own efforts.

Sometimes in our life we think of grace like an 'emergency parachute', the 'emergency parachute of grace' where we ask for God to help us in our toughest

moments when we are in financial need or when someone is seriously injured. In the Catholic tradition we call this actual grace. Actual grace is a good thing and we should always ask for it.

However, if we are not careful, a misconception can arise in our hearts: we begin to think that we only need God's grace when we are in trouble. We begin to think that God's grace is like a supplement to our own efforts or a back up **when the airplane of life gets in trouble we use that 'emergency parachute of grace.'** We begin to think that we are 'great ones' who need a little bit of help here and there instead of 'little ones' who are always dependent on the Father.

When Paul was Saul, he thought of himself as a 'great one' because he prided himself as someone who followed the letter of the law and one who was educated by one of the greatest Rabbis of the time, Gamaliel. But after his conversion he not only abandoned being a 'great one' but he even rejoiced in his littleness: I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me...for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12: 9-10). When I am little in the eyes of the world, then I am great in the eyes of God.

The conversion of St. Paul reminds us that it is a conversion from Saul to Paul, from being 'a great one' to becoming a 'little one', from self-reliance to grace-reliance.

Like a ship which positions its sails to harness the power of the wind in order to move, so too we are invited today to recognize and cooperate with the winds of grace in our life in order to sail towards our heavenly destination. Even though God created us without our consent, he will not save us without our consent. So as we continue to respond to and ask for that heavenly oxygen (grace) from the Holy Spirit in our daily lives let us remember what St. Augustine says, "God provides the wind, but man must raise the sails."