

Isaiah 43:16–21 Psalm 126:1–6
Philippians 3:8–14 *Gospel* John 8:1–11
Homily for Lent 5, March 13 2016
“The Ascent”

I want to talk with you today about conversion because it is the theme at the heart of today's readings. There is an apt metaphor Blessed John Henry Newman uses when describing conversion that is both vivid and concise.

The convert is like a man ascending from a mine to behold daylight for the first time.

Newman knew whereof he spoke. His was a profound conversion that sent shockwaves throughout the respectable and oh so very Anglican Victorian England of the mid 19th century. When we think of Newman's conversion it was not from unbelief to belief. He had not been living a dissolute life of licentiousness, vice and moral depravity. He did not go from being really, really bad to really, really good.

He had been a well-respected Oxford scholar and renowned Anglican clergyman at St. Mary's Church Oxford. He was one of the most intelligent men of his generation, schooled in ancient languages, philosophy, theology and history. He was also a gifted mathematician. Most of all he was known for his preaching. People came from far and wide to attend services at St. Mary's, so compelling and convincing was he at proclaiming the whole council of God.

In the 1830s he was one of the most respected men in all England. His was a household name.

His conversion was seven years in the making. At the age of 45, on the 9th of October 1845 in a makeshift chapel that was a converted barn-shed, in a town called Littlemore, outside of Oxford, this most respectable of Anglicans did the most unimaginable and disrespectful thing. He became a Roman Catholic.

This was the conversion that was like coming up from the mine to behold daylight of the first time. Here at midlife, Newman would die at 90, he saw clearly that the Roman Catholic Church was necessary for salvation. Apart from becoming her son, his eternal salvation would have at best been compromised and at worst lost. He understood, what more than a century later, the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* soberingly stated, when through it the Church declared:

Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved. (Lumen Gentium 14)

A month after his reception into the Church he wrote:

I had no alternative but to leave the Anglican Church unless I gave up all revealed religion".

For Newman becoming Catholic resulted from his seeing clearly what had been hidden before, the unique way the Catholic Church was the visible body of Christ in the world.

There is another man who lived some 1900 years before Newman. Saul of Tarsus was his name. Like Newman he was one of the most respected men of his generation. A Hebrew Scholar and

prized student of Jerusalem's most respected teacher Gamaliel. In his own words he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. A man of such reputation and respect that he would have gone far in Judaism. But then there was the encounter with the Lord, who when asked to identify himself to Saul declared "I am Jesus" Here was a revelation of such magnitude that it changed everything for Saul. No longer able to maintain his stature and standing in Judaism he lost everything but gained what was most important. Jesus got a hold of him and he was like a man ascending from a mine and saw the light for the first time. Now in light of Jesus everything had to be re-evaluated in the life of this man who we know to be St. Paul. In assessing everything in light of Jesus he concluded:

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 I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

Such definitive prose expresses what happened in his life. A position in Jewish society that had been so respectable and prestigious he not only left behind, but he now called "rubbish". Notice he says that in gaining Christ he was willing to suffer the loss of all things.

So too was Newman. Gone forever was his beloved Oxford. Gone were friends and security. Gone was his place within English society. He was isolated and misunderstood, not only by his countrymen, but also by many within the Catholic hierarchy.

Like St. Paul he knew what mattered most was "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

The key here is that both these men wanted to know Christ. This gets us to the heart of what we mean by conversion. The word conversion is closely tied to the word repentance.

The Greek word for repentance is *Metanoiete*. It is a word that means to "go beyond the mind that you have." See things in a new way; think about the world differently.

This is exactly what we see with Newman and St. Paul. Now having come up from the mine they saw the light for the first time. With this there was a freedom amidst the cost of conversion. They saw clearly that Jesus is the Lord, in the case of St. Paul, and that the extension of his Lordship was lived out in the Catholic Church, as Newman came to see.

Both of them had brilliant minds but in order to see Jesus clearly they were required to go beyond their minds.

Both St. Paul and Blessed John Henry Newman also knew that in this life conversion is never complete.

In his *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, written four years after his reception into the Church, Newman pointed out the danger inherent in believing oneself to have attained a satisfactory degree of spiritual progress—no matter how high a degree it actually is—and to be entitled now to discontinue the struggle against one's own nature. He warns against such an attitude. For as he observed in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*

Growth is the only evidence of Life. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

St. Paul stated the same in today's Epistle

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Those whose conversions are truly mind altering know that Jesus has made them his own and they are forever different. Such was the experience of the woman about to be stoned to death by those self-righteous people, who because of Jesus' bold statement, "he who is without sin cast the first stone", had a change of mind. They dropped their stones and walked away. The woman too, walked away with Jesus' words resounding not only in her ears but down the centuries. "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more"

May we be inspired today to think about conversion in our own lives. May we consider and ponder these questions:

- How closely do I resonate with those we have considered today?
- Is my faith one that allows me to say with St. Paul, I have made Jesus my own?
- Is my conversion one where compared to Christ everything else is secondary?

May we ponder what Newman's insight means in our own lives:

The convert is like a man ascending from a mine to behold daylight for the first time.

Let us press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.