

Every year when we get to the feast day of St. Paul, the patron of our parish, we reflect on some aspect of that relationship. We know well that if we choose someone to be our patron, it means that we acknowledge that we have something important to learn from them / there is something about their life that we want to emulate They inspire us / edify us / encourage us; there is something about them that we want to imitate in *our* lives.

We've talked about quite a few of those things over the course of the years. This year it's the three questions in the first reading and what's written *between* the lines of the middle reading that I thought might be profitable to guide our reflections on another aspect of his patronage.

The first question is the one that Paul asks, flat on the ground, bowled over by his meeting with the risen Christ. He asks, "*Who are you, Lord?*" If Paul is our patron, he could help us realize that that's the question we must ask as well: "*Who are you, Lord?*" ♦ At first we might think, *we don't* have to ask that question ~ we already know who the Lord is! Of course we do – but we also know the difference in knowing *about* a person and knowing *the person*. That second refers not just to knowing facts but to having a relationship. And because relationships involve two living, breathing persons, they constantly change, and hopefully grow, with each passing day and year. That means that asking once is not enough; we have to keep asking / keep growing in our relationship of love.

In both the first reading from Acts 22 and the middle reading from Philippians, Paul is telling the story of how he came to faith in Jesus Christ. But in the first reading, in context, he is talking to a hostile audience / a mob that has almost killed him – he's in protective custody at this point because the rumor has spread that he has brought Trophimus, a Gentile, into the temple and the mob is trying to kill him for doing so – fake news is nothing new. But Paul asks for permission to address the crowd, and ("*speaking their language,*" Luke notes: there's an application!), "*Paul addressed the people in these words,*" and then he tells his story, how he came to believe in Jesus. It's all very public / very objective.

By contrast, in the middle reading Paul is writing to his favorite parish, the Christians of Philippi in Greece. These are friends of his; they share Paul's own faith in Christ; and so with them he can share on a more intimate level. From one perspective he is writing about the same thing – his journey to coming to faith in Christ. But with these his friends, we get a glimmer of Paul's interior spiritual life. In this case, he tells them nothing about the specifics of what happened on the road to Damascus: instead, what he tells them is all about his relationship with this person, Jesus Christ, whom he met for the first time on that road to Damascus, but who now has become more important to him than anything and everything else in the whole world. His relationship with Jesus is the "supreme good" he says; everything else, even the things that before he had considered the most valuable, now he considers, by comparison, not even merely less good but *scybala* – so much rubbish – compared to this supreme good / this greatest good of all, of *knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. Not knowing *about* him, but *knowing* him – having this vital / personal / loving relationship with him.

His words remind us of what Pope Benedict once said, so succinctly, that in fact, Christianity is not so much a set of doctrines and rules and practices as it is above all a relationship with a person, Jesus Christ. And as Paul said, knowing Jesus Christ, changes everything else as well! "*There were birds all around, but I never heard them singing, till there was you,*" was the way Music Man put it.

And that is where this year I'd like to suggest St. Paul can be our most helpful patron because when we think about imitating Paul. we usually want to jump straight over to his call / his mission / his work Granted, that work was enormously important, but it was not the starting point – Paul applies to himself

what God said to the prophet Jeremiah – “*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the Gentiles I appointed you.*”

With Paul as our patron we can see how those same words then are true of us too – Before we were formed in the womb God knew us / before we were born, God dedicated us /destined us, as Ananias said, *to know his will, to know the Righteous One, Jesus Christ, to hear the sound of his voice in the Scriptures and in our heart, and to be his witnesses before all to what we have seen and heard.*

Just to state the obvious, before we can be witnesses to what we have seen and heard, we have to see and hear. ♦ That may require a conversion on our part as well. St. Augustine, who knew a thing or two about conversion, put his experience like this in his Confessions – “*Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!... You were with me, but I was not with you.... Then you called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burn for your peace.*”

This year, maybe that could be the favor we ask of the Lord – to have that grace of allowing the Lord to break into our hard hearts this year and help us to grow significantly in our relationship with him. ♦ And if we do allow the risen Christ to break into our hearts and reveal himself to us more deeply than ever before, then the second question Paul asked becomes as natural as can be – “*What am I to do, Lord?*” he asks.

You noticed that in this version of Paul’s call, that was not spelled out immediately – “*Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told about everything appointed for you to do.*” He is sent to the Church / those who already believe in Christ; the community of believers will keep our relationship with Christ rooted in reality / the facts. Our relationship with Jesus, as deep and personal as it may be, was never designed to be just Tea for Two. It finds its full context in the witness of the entire community of believers, and just as every relationship grows and matures over time, so does our response to the call to *be his witnesses before all to what we have seen and heard.*

When you love someone, you find yourself seeing things with their eyes / viewing the experiences you find yourself in from *their* perspective. Friday Fr. Andrew, who’s with a number of our kids at World Youth Day in Panama, texted us a photo taken from their bus of a monkey in a tree. That’s something you don’t see in frigid north central Ohio; he saw that scene not from the perspective of the local Panamanians, for whom I’m sure it would be a kind of ho-hum experience, but through our eyes; he knew that we would find this fascinating and so wanted to share it with us.

A person who is married doesn’t go around flashing their wedding ring and blathering on constantly, “I’m married, I’m married, I’m married!” But s/he doesn’t hide the ring and doesn’t act inconsistently with the covenant it symbolizes but is proud to share with anyone the testimony of what a wonderful person they are married to. ♦ If we love the Lord with a deep, personal love, then we too will see the events and situations that we find ourselves in through his eyes / from his perspective, and what he would want us to do for him there. We too will act consistent with our covenant relationship with him. We won’t see ourselves as belonging to ourselves any more at all but rather as someone *has indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus.* ♦ Who does this body / blood /whole person belong to? Paul says, no longer to me, but to the Lord.

And that leaves just the final question, and that’s the one that Ananias puts to Paul – “*Why delay?*” Let’s here and now, at this liturgy, renew our covenant with the Lord, and give our whole selves back to him who gave his whole self to us, so that this week we in turn may see things with his eyes and hear with his

ears and *be his witnesses before all to what we have seen and heard.*