

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Acts 9.1-22

Matthew 19.27-end

I think it would surprise the vast majority of New Zealanders and Australians to hear that the most prolific author produced by these countries was an English Baptist minister who spent his working life there. F W Boreham wrote some fifty books and over three thousand essays and from what should have been obscurity exercised an international ministry. I discovered him in my early evangelical days and he remains one of the few writers from those days I could still read with profit and enjoyment. One series of his books was devoted to expounding the favourite texts of famous historical or fictional characters – he might very well choose the favourite text of Mr Pickwick as that of Charles Dickens. It is the memory of that series which has provoked my subject this morning when we celebrate the conversion of St Paul, *What was Paul's favourite text?*

Clearly it has to be from the Old Testament, the New Testament was not yet in existence, and because Paul was soaked in the Old Testament and constantly quoted it in his letters it seems difficult to choose from so many references. But there is one text which is central to his theology. It comes from the work of an obscure Hebrew prophet, tucked away at the back of the Old Testament, Habakkuk, no-one is sure even about his name. The text that gripped St Paul so powerfully was, *The just shall live by faith.*

But what Habakkuk meant by this was somewhat different from Paul's interpretation, New Testament writers could be rather cavalier in their use of the Old Testament. The problem the Hebrew prophet was struggling with was the suffering of the righteous at the hands of the wicked. Habakkuk believed that for its unfaithfulness Judea was to be punished at the hands of a brutal and barbaric nation, the Chaldeans; a nation which had failed God was to be handed over to another which had failed God considerably more. Habakkuk was bewildered by this. His response was that to have faith in God meant clinging to him even when his actions could not be understood, or even when God appeared not to be acting at all. Only the just who lived by faith in God's, at times, incomprehensible wisdom would endure the time of testing.

Paul's horizons are broader, he takes an obscure text from an obscure prophet and makes it the core of his interpretation of the gospel and in doing so shows what a radical transformation his conversion had effected in his life. One of Paul's greatest boasts in his pre-Christian days was that of being a Pharisee, he had been among those who believed that it was by human effort - the meticulous adherence to the law of Moses and the minutely observed practice of hair-splitting rituals - that one was brought into a right relationship with God. Habakkuk's text was for Paul a moment of illumination. It revealed that the initiative comes from God who loves us and seeks to bring wholeness into our lives irrespective of any merit we are trying to win by our religious and moral efforts. Having realised this, such efforts must have seemed to Paul like those of a child seeking to win the love of parents who already loved it to distraction by obsessively doing things it thought would please them. Paul believed that God does not love us because of the good we try to do, the good we try to do should be a grateful response to a God who already loves us unconditionally. The just live by the faith that it is God's unmerited love which saves us not our feeble attempts to win a love that is already ours.

The words of a little-known Hebrew prophet became the foundation stone of Pauline theology and amongst the most important words in Christian history. It is these words, rediscovered by Martin Luther, which changed the face of Europe and brought about the greatest crisis the

Church has ever had to face. When Luther nailed his theses to the door of the Cathedral he was simply resurrecting a truth which the Church had lost sight of. Salvation was not to be obtained by indulgences, by masses for the dead or any other attempt to manipulate God, we are justified by faith, by recognising our helplessness and casting ourselves naked into the ocean of God's loving forgiveness.

A 20<sup>th</sup> century example of this is Dom Bede Griffiths. A devout young Anglican, he gathered round him a like-minded group of friends to lead a semi-monastic life of prayer and good works. When this broke up he worked in the slums of east London, but this failed to lead to the peace and inner assurance he so desperately longed for. Griffiths was a mystic, he named his autobiography, *The Golden String*, after a verse by William Blake:

*I will give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball,  
It will lead you in by heaven's gate  
Set in Jerusalem's wall.*

He grasped the end of that golden string whilst on a retreat where he confessed his religious dissatisfaction to a priest. The priest's response was to ask him to imagine himself as a child tottering on the edge of a trapdoor opening into a dark cellar, in the darkness below stands his loving father who is inviting him to jump and assuring him that if he does he will safely catch him. *Jump*, said the priest, Griffiths did so and was caught by the everlasting arms. He eventually became a Benedictine monk and then a Christian guru with his own ashram in India. What an extraordinary life, and it all began with that jump of faith into the darkness. Griffiths' life emphasises that the leap of faith is not a single, impetuous act, but rather a process sanctioned by the Church and supported by the wisdom of fellow believers which subsequently marks the whole of one's life.

FW Boreham was born in Tunbridge Wells. As a youth he became a student at Spurgeon's Baptist College. It was Charles Spurgeon himself who asked him to go to New Zealand which was desperately short of Baptist ministers. He was an exceptionally able young man, and, I imagine, not without ambition. New Zealand must have seemed the end of all his hopes, the burying of himself in obscurity. But he obeyed the call, he jumped into the darkness, and there discovered the space to read and write and exercise a ministry which reached to the other side of the world.

I fancy St Paul on the Damascus Road must have felt a little like Boreham when confronted by Spurgeon's request. This blood-thirsty young Pharisee was clearly not without ambition. His encounter with the risen Christ must have seemed a terminus marking the end of all his hopes. If this is so, how wrong he was. Throughout the world today millions are celebrating the Conversion of St Paul - it should, of course, be called the Conversion of Saul the Pharisee - whose life from the moment he was dazzled by Christ became a living commentary on Habakkuk's text, *The just shall live by faith*.