47.

Paul: A Man Who Found His Vocation,
And a Vocation That Made the Man

If we were to find ourselves stranded a long way from home and wanting desperately to get back, what most likely would we be thinking about? My guess is that we would be thinking about our families and our friends. We would be remembering their faces and imagining the sound of their voices. In our mind’s eye we would be watching them in settings that felt at once very near and very far away. When the Israelites, six centuries before the birth of Jesus, had been dragged away into exile, they wanted nothing more than to get back to their homeland and especially to see Jerusalem once again. Psalm 137 memorialized that experience:

By the rivers of Babylon—there we wept when we remembered Zion. / On the willows there we hung up our harps. . . / How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?"

The prodigal son of Luke 15 quickly found himself dreaming of his father’s house and longing to return. Exiles and refugees, runaway children, soldiers at war miles away from their native shores, captives, prisoners: the desire to be rejoined with the people they love must burn in them like a fever.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to prisons. He also knew what it was like to be without a place he could call his home. Paul did not have the slightest doubt that he received his vocation directly from God. “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1); “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of
“God” (1 Cor 1:1); “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” (2 Cor 1:1); “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal 1:1); “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Eph 1:1); “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Col 1:1). And then: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philem 1).

**Calling has consequences**

One consequence of his being called was that Paul would never again be able to claim any one place as his home. “Home” would henceforth be every place and no place; every place where there was a household of faith; and no place, because he would be constantly on mission and because the believer’s place, ultimately, is with the Lord. Yet a second consequence of his being called was that Paul would frequently find himself under arrest. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord” (Eph 4:1); “I am an ambassador in chains” (Eph 6:20); “my imprisonment is for Christ” (Phil 1:13); “Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments” (2 Cor 11:23); “Remember my chains” (Col 4:18). Paul may have longed to be with Christ—“my desire is to depart his communities—but he also wanted, passionately, to be with his communities. The ear catches a wonderful tenderness in his words, “One thing more—prepare a guest room for me” (Philem 22). When Paul writes of being absent in body but present in spirit (Col 2:5), he reveals what goes on inside an apostle’s imagination. For an apostle, the body may be in prison or in chains, yet the heart never loses its freedom. In every moment, Paul is with the churches he helped to establish throughout the world of the Eastern Mediterranean. In the measure that the heart centers on
others, it becomes truly free. But the longing to see them in person and to touch them remains. When we love others, we get attached. For an apostle like Paul, those attachments become many and separation hurts, especially when the apostle is locked inside a prison.

There is much about Paul that I would love to ask him. He may have known more about the life and ministry of Jesus than his letters would lead us to think, but it looks like he did not have any contact with Jesus during his ministry. When Jesus appeared to Paul—“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor 15:8)—what exactly did Paul see? He could not have recognized Jesus because of any physical features, nor does he even hint at a description of what the risen Jesus looked like. So, what did Paul see? What did the appearance consist of? What did Paul mean when he wrote that God “was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal 1:16)? Granted that his religious world had been turned upside down, was it at that moment that he began to feel himself called? For up to that point, Paul had been moving aggressively against his fellow Jews who had gone over to Christ. “I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it” (Gal 1:13)

**Humility is all about God**

Whatever was driving Paul’s zeal and fierce intolerance, it was not a divine call. Maybe the appearance consisted of a sudden, electrifying realization that he had gotten the mystery of God wrong. Perhaps having been raised to think about God in terms of power, he saw nothing wrong about marshaling institutional resources against the breakaway sect of Christians. At the end of second Corinthians Paul recounts a word he received in response to an urgent prayer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). I
like to think that Paul had finally understood that humility is above all a divine attribute, not just a human virtue. The humility Jesus exhibited in his own life was a reflection of the humility of God himself. If discovering that insight is what happened, then I would like to ask Paul next how long it took for this insight to sink in. In the way they accepted persecution and refused to return evil for evil, the followers of Jesus may have taught Paul something about the divine nature. Paul was looking for God in the wrong place. Someone might reasonably beg God to get him out of prison; but who would have thought God would actually be in the jail?

**A life that looked more like Christ’s**

That Paul in chains was thinking of the churches and households he already knew or that he wanted to visit may not sound very remarkable, but it gives us a hint as to where Paul got his energy from: it came from his affection for the people. But his energy came from another source as well. The more he reflected on the pattern of Jesus’ life, especially his suffering and death, the more privileged he felt. Paul saw the sufferings of Jesus replicated in his own life. He even boasted to the Corinthians that he had undergone more labors, more humiliation, more danger, and more imprisonment than any of the other apostles. And this fact—sharing in the sufferings of Christ—confirmed Paul in his conviction that he had been called personally by God to serve his Son. Centuries later Ignatius of Loyola would characterize what Paul experienced as the third kind of humility: “in order to imitate Christ our Lord and to be actually more like him, I want and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth, and ignominy with Christ in great ignominy rather than fame, and I desire more to be thought a fool and an idiot for Christ than to be
thought wise and prudent in this world.” Humility to this
degree is not the criterion of success most people have been
trained to recognize. It is a peculiar sort of consolation to find
oneself glad to be going through what Jesus went through.
Yet why did Jesus go through it?

The simplest answer is that fidelity to God brought
Jesus close to his people, and fidelity to his people brought
Jesus close to God. Jesus did not embrace rejection and
disgrace for its own sake. The contours of his ministry were
determined by his response to the human scene as he saw it in
front of him. In his effort to lift burdens and drive out
demons—the forces that seek only to crush and exploit human
beings, especially the most vulnerable ones among us—Jesus
paid a high price. He sharply criticized the religious
leadership of his day because they claimed the authority to
interpret the will of God without having any idea of what God
was really like. And the reason they did not know what God
was like was that they could not see the world from the
perspective of poor widows, men with withered arms, or those
who might have fallen among robbers.

Thus Paul could say to the community at Colossae, “I
am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my
flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for
the sake of his body, that is the church” (Col 1:24). The
suffering he was going through resulted from his commitment
to them, and in some sense Christ’s own suffering was now
being extended through time in and through apostles like Paul.
For him, building the church was essential because the Christian
community has to be Jesus’ witness throughout the ages, doing
in every generation what Jesus did in his. The resistance that
Paul faced, the exhaustion he endured, the humiliation and
ridicule that came from some people in his own religious tradition, taught him about the humility of God. The self-emptying of Jesus, so unforgettably expressed in the second chapter of the letter to the Philippians, must have struck a deep chord in Paul’s own experience. One does not “put on the mind of Christ” easily. There’s a lot of letting go that must take place constantly. To be crucified to the world, as Paul described his life in closing his letter to the Galatians, is to carry the human family with us always.

Lifelong solidarity with God’s people is, in the end, what an apostle’s calling is all about. Paul discovered, painfully, that blind zeal was no substitute for a real vocation. Living that vocation fully, once he found it, made him into the human being that he really wanted to be.

[2008]