

Sermon for Sunday 25 January 2026 – The Conversion of Paul – Revd Simon Pitcher

[Jeremiah 1.4-10]; Acts 9.1-22; Psalm 67; Galatians 1.11-16a; Matthew 19.27-end

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy spirit. Please do be seated.

Today, the Church around the world celebrates the Festival of the Baptism of St Paul, hence our Bible readings today, for the conversion of St Paul. But when I read the Bible readings today, there was one phrase that caught my attention, one phrase that I was drawn to and I wanted what it could mean. It's the phrase where Jesus says, 'At the renewal of all all things'; the renewal of all things - I wonder what that might mean. It seems that he's suggesting that God is going to do something in the future, something to renew all things, something to make all things new. So perhaps there's a reference here to new life, eternal life. I think in the baptism, the conversion, of St Paul, we have a signpost to an eternal truth, God who makes all things new, God who renews all things.

In the Bible, there is a continuous theme running through it of a creator God, one who teaches us that God is the source of life. He's made us and we are his. All that exists, exists because of the love of God. And there's another set reading that we could have used this morning from the Old Testament from the Prophet Jeremiah. He writes, 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you.' So that suggests to us that God knows us while we're being made. Jeremiah is saying that God's hand is upon us from the very beginning. But the Bible is full of stories of humans failing and messing up and the call of God to remake things. I was drawn to the idea of a potter. The Prophet Isaiah says in Chapter 45, he imagines God as a potter in making things new. And he says we're like a vase in the hands of God being made on the potter's wheel. And Isaiah writes, 'Woe to you who strive with your maker, earth and vessels with the potter. Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making?", or "Your work has no handles." With a surname like Pitcher, you can imagine that that entertained me. But no, God is going to make with us what God wants to make, and God wants to make things new. God wants to renew all things.

I saw a little video recently on Facebook, I think it was, where there's a man sitting at his potter's wheel with a lump of clay spinning round on the potter's wheel. And a cat walks into the room and the cat jumps up onto the bench next to the potter and sees the spinning clay going round. And cats, when they're curious, can't help but do that, can they? So they give it a prod and a pat. And as the cat does this, he makes a beautiful vase. I'm sure it's an AI film, but it entertained me that this cat was making something so beautiful.

These are the verses from the Prophet Jeremiah. 'This is the message that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. "Jeremiah, go down to the potter's house and I will give you my message there." So I went down to the potter's house and I saw him working with clay at the wheel. He was making a pot from clay, but there was something wrong with the pot. So the potter used that clay to make another pot. And with his hands, he shaped the pot the way he wanted it to be. And the message came from the Lord to me, "Family of Israel, you know that I can make the same thing with you. You are like the clay in the potter's hands, and I am the potter."

So God who can renew and remake all things. It's interesting that in the Book of Genesis chapter 2, God makes Adam out of mud, out of clay, moulds him into a shape, and then breathes life into him. So I like this idea of the potter making things and renewing all things, because it suggests that we, too, even if sometimes we feel like cracked pots or pictures even, not much use, not very beautiful, God can take us and remould us and reshape us into something beautiful. And in doing so in this life, it points us towards an eternal truth of the renewal of all things.

We can see how God does this in the story of St. Paul. We encounter him as Saul. And Saul, as we first encounter him in the story of Acts today, is very angry. He's a well-educated man. He was a pharisee. And he considers that Christianity, those who invoke the name of Jesus, are insulting his God. He's very angry that anyone should suggest that Jesus was the Messiah. So in his righteous anger, he's determined to stamp out this new-fangled idea. And he sets off with letters of authority from the temple priests in Jerusalem to go to Damascus with a squad of soldiers to arrest anybody there that he finds who are worshipping Jesus and to drag them back in chains to Jerusalem for trial and execution. So here is a very angry, violent man, somebody to be feared, somebody whose name, if it was heard, would be enough to make anybody hide behind the sofa. But Paul, Saul, is a broken pot. He's got it all wrong, and God is going to fashion a new version. He's going to renew and remake Saul. We know the story. Saul has a life-changing vision of Jesus whilst he's making that journey to Damascus. A vision that transforms him and remakes him into someone completely different.

We need to note that as part of the remaking of Saul into Paul, there's a model of death and rebirth. Saul is blinded. He's completely incapacitated for three days. He cannot see anything. He cannot eat. He cannot drink. He cannot do anything. He's in the dark waiting. So in effect, he's dead. He's died to the old self, the old way that he had been made. And God is remaking and renewing him. It's a bit like being in the womb, perhaps, or it's a bit like being in the tomb. Who else was in the tomb for three days being remade? So Saul is a lump of shapeless clay on the potter's wheel, dead in effect to the world, but being renewed and remade into Paul.

Well, the renewal and transformation of Saul into Paul is effected through the Ministry of brave and faithful Ananias, a man from Damascus who overcomes his fear, and he comes to pray over Saul as the Lord commanded. And we read that as Ananias prays, Paul's eyes are opened and he can now see. But he sees things completely differently, his worldview has completely changed. No longer vile and angry or seeking to persecute others, no longer seeking to take others to their death, he's now going to devote himself to Christ Jesus. He's been completely renewed, completely remade, and he takes a little food and drink for bodily strength, and he's baptised as a sign of spiritual renewal.

Well, baptism is a symbol of dying, isn't it? We go into the water to die to our old self, to wash off our old self, and we come out of the water to a new life, to a new way of life, washing off all that's broken, being remade into a disciple of Christ Jesus. After all, a potter has to keep the clay wet if it's going to be reshaped into something new before being fired in the heat of the Holy Spirit. And so Paul immediately proclaims in Damascus, Jesus is the son of God, and all who heard him were amazed. He's been remade and renewed by the Spirit of God.

So I wonder what that would teach us, that story, about our own stories and our own renewal, and what's it saying about eternal life? I'm not much of a musician, as you know, so I'm trying to think of an illustration to show the point. We've sung some hymns this morning, and when we sing hymns, each verse stands alone. If we sing a chorus, the chorus affirms the verse we've sung. But only when we've sung the whole hymn, have we sung the whole story. So maybe each of the people we read about in the Bible and each of us are like a verse in a hymn. And we can't see the whole hymn, and we don't know how many verses there are. But all through the story of the Christian Church on Earth, we share together in a chorus that points to a truth, an eternal truth, about what it is when Jesus says God will renew all things. I don't know what that's going to look like. What does it mean God's going to renew all things? I don't know. I can't tell you. But we can look to pointers and signs from the verses that have been sung in the story, and they point us to the whole picture that the song might be about.

So in that sense, St Paul had a powerful, life-changing encounter with Christ. Our Bible readings tell us that he was known by God while he was being made in the womb. But as Saul, he was a broken pot, and then he was remade and renewed. In the story of the people of Israel in the Bible, God does that over and over, renewing and remaking.

Yesterday in our Cathedral Church in Bury, we celebrated that we had a new bishop. Our last bishop retired about a year ago. So there's been a period of waiting, a period of reflection, a period of being remade. Now with our new bishop, we look forward expectantly to new life. What will the next chapter of the story of the Church in Suffolk be like? So there are pointers in human life to an eternal truth about being renewed and remade.

Jesus was present in his mother's womb being made. The hand of the Lord is upon him. We celebrate at Christmas and in the season of Epiphany that he lived among us a human life as ours. He had been made like us. And then in the tomb, he was unmade, as we each will be, unmade. But then he was remade. And we say at every funeral from St Paul, the letter that St Paul writes to the Philippians, I think it is, 'Our frail bodies will be conformed to his glorious body'. In other words, we will be remade as part of our entry into eternal life. St Paul knew what he was writing about because he'd experienced an element of it.

And that, I think, is the pointer of his story to an eternal truth, what it is to be made, unmade, and remade. So all these things point us to that eternal truth, Jesus, who promises to us that there will be a renewal of all things. And he says to his disciples, to us, that we will take our place in his eternal Kingdom. In Jesus's name, Amen.