

Matt's Message for the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul

Traditionally, the Anglican Church remembers and celebrates the conversion of St. Paul on January the 25th. Here are some thoughts about that event which is so crucial to the formation of the Church. The story is told in the Bible in the book of Acts, chapter 9, verses 1 to 9.

There's an awesome series of lectures available online through Yale University. The program is called Open Yale Courses. Videos of a lot of their classes can be viewed by anyone for free. These are some of the best teachers in the world, lecturing on everything from economics to ancient literature. When you think about it, it's a pretty good deal. You can either go to Yale for tens of thousands of dollars, or you can stay in your own home and watch the lectures for free. That's an easy decision for me.

Professor Giuseppe Mazzotta is my favourite Yale lecturer.



He is an expert on my favourite medieval poet, Dante Alighieri, who wrote *The Divine Comedy* back in the 1300s in Italy. Mazzotta has a very warm, personable style of teaching and his passion about the subject is always evident in his graceful hand gestures and lively facial expressions. How a teacher moves and speaks is almost as important as what he or she says. Mazzotta is a master teacher.

The lectures are great, but the question and answer time (at the end of the class) is sometimes even more interesting. In one class, he made the statement that love is different and more powerful than friendship. During the question time, a student asked Mazzotta to develop that thought because it was a pretty bold statement. The professor said that friendship can be a kind of love (there are different kinds of love), but what we're talking about is something different and more radical and powerful: the experience of "falling in love" or "losing your heart" to someone or "falling head over heels in love." The language of

falling is used because you are losing control. This kind of love has a power quite different from friendship.

The Bible is the real authority on falling in love because it has the world's greatest love song: *The Song of Songs*. In this book from the Old Testament, a young man and a young woman have basically gone crazy with love and desire. It's so explicit that ancient Jewish scholars had a rule that no-one could read it till they were 30. They didn't want teenagers sneaking off with a Bible and reading it in secret. What an interesting problem to have. Theologians have always tried to make the *Song of Songs* less interesting and exciting by saying it's an allegory about the love between God and the soul. It certainly is that too, but anyone can tell that it's primarily about two young people who are madly in love.

For these two people, love has changed their world, turned their world upside down. And that's what Professor Mazzotta says love does for us; it changes us. Having a friend is awesome. Friendship is one of the greatest joys of life. I'm extremely grateful for the friends I've had and the friends I have.

But love or "falling in love" or "being in love" is different. "Being in love" has a different power, a power that changes you and changes your entire world. There can be something *violent* (Mazzotta uses that word) about love; it knocks you down, causes pain, and can even make you sick. Well, maybe love can't actually make you sick, but the word *lovesick* seems to suggest that it can. Falling in love can make you forget about your old friends completely. It can cause you to do dangerous, unexpected, ridiculous things.

After the *Song of Songs*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is probably the second best love story. Or maybe the best – we can argue the point. It's become such a cliché: the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet. But the story is actually revolutionary. Romeo and Juliet were from different families – the Capulets and Monagues – who had been fighting for generations, destabilizing life in the city of Verona. When they fell in love, it was the ultimate taboo; a Capulet *cannot* love a Montague. It was an unthinkable disaster, upsetting the way things were. But in fact, the way things were needed to be upset. Their love changed the city. They both (spoiler alert!) die in the end, but after their deaths, the Capulets and Montagues realized they could not continue their feud. They decided to live in peace. The love of the two young people caused great political transformation in Verona. It was too late for Romeo and Juliet, but the world was changed for the better.

As Mazzotta would say, that's the power of love: violence, transformation, agony, desperation, adventure, change. Friendship is great, but it's not usually those things.

You've probably never heard of St. Paul's conversion spoken of in this way. It's probably the last thing he'd like me to say about him: to say he was swept off his feet and fell madly in love. But when Paul – the one who had been pursuing and persecuting Christians – was suddenly blinded by the light, having a violent, earth-shaking vision of

Christ, the only way to really make sense of it is to say: he fell madly and desperately in love with the tortured and crucified and resurrected Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.



This painting by Caravaggio (1601) perfectly captures the desperation, the confusion, the disorientation that Paul must have been feeling, having a vision of the man whose followers he was harassing. The proud, efficient, smart man has been brought low and is now totally out of control. Now his future is completely uncertain. Now he faces embarrassment and repentance. Now he has to start all over again. This new love has changed everything. Lying on his back with his arms stretched upwards, that pose says it all.

We may as well say: Paul lost his heart that day and never got it back. For the rest of his life, he was on fire with passion and desire and he acted like a crazy person. Like Romeo and Juliet, his love would eventually be the death of him, when his head was cut off in Rome. Love made him forget everything he was doing before and made him a new person. Everything that meant the world to him before, meant less than nothing to him when love came to him.

To say he became a *friend* of God simply doesn't do justice to the depth of his new feelings. This was not a friendship. This was deep, eternal love. It was a *heart* thing, not just an intellectual decision to adopt a different religion.

Alice Munro, the great Canadian short fiction writer, makes one of her characters say: "Love removes the world." This *literally* happened to Paul when his vision of Christ blinded him. And after his vision and his conversion, Paul was not really in the world very much anymore. He was certainly alive on the earth, but I'd say part of him stayed up there in heaven with Christ. The rest of his life was a simple story of trying to reunite the earthly part of him with that part of him that was eternally in the Spirit in heaven with Christ. That idea may be theologically wrong, but it's just a thought.

As with all analogies or comparisons, the idea of Paul falling in love can only be taken so far and then it breaks down. There's a huge difference between falling in love with another human and falling in love with God. Love of God should cause us to worship God. We worship God, but we should never worship any human. If you make a god of someone you love, you will be devastated when you are forced to realize that the human is imperfect. The human you love may even start to dislike you and want you to go away. If you've made that person your foundation, your only hope, and your everything, then you'll have no-where to turn when that person turns out to be a mere human or even a bad human.

Worship should only be given to God because God can't change or be taken away. Love of God is a love that is eternal, unchanging, and transformational. On this divine love, you truly can build your entire life, never having to fear that this love will leave your side or stop returning your own love.

Clearly, when Paul met Christ in his vision on the road to Damascus, he experienced exactly the kind of love Professor Mazzotta was talking about: the love that breaks our old heart and requires a new heart to be born in us.

Paul forgot about his old friends.

He forgot about his old ideas.

He forgot about the whole world for a while.

All he saw and all he heard was that light and that voice.

From that place, he had to be led by the hand.

He didn't suddenly understand everything.

He suddenly knew nothing.

*"Sometimes I see your face
And the stars seem to lose their place."*

-Sting, "Why Should I Cry For You?"