

The only depiction of St. Paul at St. Paul's is in our 8<sup>th</sup> window in the SE corner of this room. Windows 1-6 are from the life and teachings of Jesus. #7 is the day of Pentecost. And #8 comes right out of our first lesson from Acts 26. It's a reading we always read when we celebrate our Patronal feast day, the Conversion of St. Paul, every January.

In our Gospel, Jesus warns his followers that they will be dragged before governors and kings. In the latter part of Acts, Paul is having to deal with both. Paul has been appearing before the Roman Governors Felix, then, Festus. And in Acts 26 he's also testifying before the Roman client king, Herod Agrippa II. This Herod is the great-grandson of the nasty King Herod from the Christmas story.

Paul is telling this king about his conversion experience, how Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus in a blinding light and then called Paul to follow him and go out and preach the good news to the Greco-Roman world. And Paul concludes with the words printed on our window, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."<sup>1</sup>

After Paul gave this testimony, he eventually appealed his case to Caesar and was taken to Rome in captivity. Scripture is silent on what happened next, but it appears that Paul was acquitted and spent several more years as a missionary, perhaps even making it as far as Spain. He eventually was rearrested on other charges. He was convicted, and subsequently beheaded in Rome.

As I said, these sorts of things were predicted by Jesus in our Gospel lesson from Matthew. He said his followers would be dragged before governors and kings. Some would even be put to death. But those who remained faithful, even those who had been killed, paradoxically would be saved. They might taste of suffering and death in this world. But they would ultimately be saved. Or as Luke's parallel version says it,

"By standing firm, you will win your souls."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, Jesus encourages his followers to be both wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Innocent in that they choose to do the right thing and stick to it. But wise as serpents in that they use every human tool available to them while doing the right thing.

And in the history of Christianity, there is perhaps no other figure that so exemplifies being as wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove as Sir Thomas More. He is also St. Thomas More, not only in the Roman Catholic tradition he was defending, but also in our Mother Church, the Church of England, some of whose members 5 centuries ago made sure that Thomas More was put to death by beheading.

Sir/Saint Thomas More is the protagonist of the 1966 Best Picture winner, *A Man for All Seasons*. He is portrayed by Paul Scofield who won the Academy Award for Best Actor. He had previously won the Tony for Best Actor for the same role on Broadway.

"A man for all seasons" was a description of Thomas More by a contemporary. It's an apt description—More tried to be constant in the midst of changes all around him. Yes, he

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 26:19

<sup>2</sup> Lk 21:19

was wise as a serpent, and he was willing to bend and compromise in small matters. But in matters of deep conscience, he remained true to his bedrock principles.

In history, and in the movie, More becomes the Lord High Chancellor of England, the chief minister to King Henry VIII. But More gets tangled up with Henry when Henry desires to annul his marriage with his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Thomas More opposes any annulment or divorce on religious grounds. He tries to serve his king as loyally as he can. But his loyalty to God always comes first.

As an aside, I do need to state this. You often hear that Henry VIII founded the church of England. That is not so. Yes, the English Reformation is complex. But the Church of England existed before Henry VIII. At times in that past, it was in union with Rome and with the Pope. But at other times, it was completely independent and separate from the Roman church.

Eventually Henry VIII does push through parliament legislation that once again separates the Church of England from the Church of Rome. But Henry does not found any sort of Protestant church. Henry VIII was a strong anti-Protestant. The Reformation in England would not truly begin until after Henry's death.

During the 13 years between Henry's break with Rome and his death, scholars today classify the Church of England not as Protestant, and certainly not Roman Catholic, but as Henrician Catholic.

But in *A Man for All Seasons*, Henry VIII does begin to make moves to push through an annulment by separating England from papal authority and oversight.

Thus, More is forced to step down from his office as Chancellor. Later parliament will pass the Act of Supremacy, that declares the king, and not the pope, to be the head of the church in England. And that same year parliament passes the Treasons Act, making it a capital crime to not support the Act of Supremacy.

But here's where More is as wise as a serpent. He refuses to be baited into publicly stating his views. More was trained as a lawyer and a judge. And he takes the legal tack of remaining completely silent on these matters. He can't in good conscience sign on to the Act of Supremacy—he believes it is a fundamental violation of his conscience. But he also will not speak against it, publicly, privately, or in writing.

More is arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London. More is repeatedly interrogated. But his captors are unable to prosecute him with any charges that will stick.

In More's words, "I do none harm, I say none harm, I think none harm. And if this be not enough to keep a man alive, in good faith I long not to live."

Eventually More is put on trial. The scenes where he walks into the courtroom are reminiscent of one of the director's other movies, *High Noon*. The marshal in *High Noon*, played by Gary Cooper, is shown walking down the main street of town alone to face the Miller gang.

In *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More is shown in a similar way walking alone into the courtroom do legal battle. Eventually it takes false testimony to convict More in a court of law. Richard Rich claims falsely that More told him point blank that parliament does not have the authority to make the king the Head of the Church. When More hears this perjured testimony, he says "I am a dead man."

Tragically, Richard Rich was originally one of More's protégés. But as More ascended to power, Rich wanted More to appoint him to some other position of power. More refused, worrying that Rich did not have sufficient character to avoid the temptations that power would bring.

More rather says,

"Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher; perhaps a great one."

Rich replies, tellingly, "If I was, who would know it?"

More says, "You; your pupils; your friends; God. Not a bad public, that."

But Rich wants raw power, not the appreciation of his pupils or friends, or God. And so he sidles up to Thomas Cromwell, More's successor as chief minister, and More's chief adversary. It is Cromwell who will try to convict More. By the way, in 2009 a very popular book series about Cromwell came out titled, *Wolf Hall*. It was later made into a 6-hour TV miniseries in 2015. Both the book and miniseries are highly acclaimed.

In *A Man for All Seasons*, Cromwell bribes Rich to give false testimony by making him the Attorney General for Wales. And as Rich commits perjury and is leaving, a sad Thomas More addresses him. More asks Rich about the new chain of office Rich is wearing. And he says,

"Why Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world... but for Wales?"

And after More is convicted based on Richard Rich's false testimony, More addresses the court. Since he has been condemned, he does break his silence and voice his opposition to what he believes are parliament's illegal actions. But he also says, "I am the king's true subject, and I pray for him and all the realm."

And More expresses this again at his execution. He says, "I die his Majesty's good servant but God's first."

More tries to be constant and consistent and obedient to his core beliefs and principles throughout the seasons of his life. He wants to support his king. But God has to come first.

And that's consistent before his time as Chancellor... During his time as Chancellor... After his time as Chancellor... When he is arrested, and imprisoned, and interrogated, and tried, and executed. In *A Man for All Seasons*, the director often shows

seasonal changes in the background. But in the foreground, More is consistent throughout all of these changes of fortune in his life.

*A Man for All Seasons* is a cautionary tale for leaders, and a cautionary tale for Christians and people of good conscience.

I know in my lifetime that there have been political leaders from both sides of the aisle who have been guided by core bedrock principles. I might not always agree with their principles, but I have to admire their consistency.

And some of them even have had to make the choice to forsake their power to stick to their principles.

Of course, we have plenty of examples of folks, also on both sides of the aisle, who do just the opposite.

They will forsake principles in order to gain or retain power.

Thomas More was officially declared a saint in 1935. And in 2000, Pope John Paul II made him the patron saint for statesmen and politicians. That's a good thing. Political leaders would benefit from following his example.

But More is also a good example for us non-politicians as well.

Will we forsake our faith, or give up our principles? Will we do it to protect our power, or popularity, or portfolios?

Or will we put God first, no matter what?

Jesus calls his followers to be both wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Wise as serpents in that we use every human tool available to us while doing the right thing. And innocent as doves in choosing to do the right thing and sticking to it.

"By standing firm," Jesus says, "you will win your souls."