

Year of St Paul

Pope Benedict XVI has declared June 2008 – June 2009 a *Year of St Paul* in celebration of the 2000th anniversary of the apostle's birth. It is reckoned that St Paul was born between 7 – 10 A.D. The Holy Father explained that:

'The Apostle of the Gentiles, who dedicated himself to the spreading of the good news to all peoples, spent himself for the unity and harmony of all Christians. May he guide us and protect us in this bimillenary celebration, helping us to advance in the humble and sincere search for the full unity of all the members of the mystical body of Christ.'

This series of leaflets offers a brief introduction to the letters of St Paul as heard at Sunday Mass. They are intended both for readers and members of the liturgical assembly to help them appreciate the context of the second reading and encourage a greater familiarity with St Paul's writings.

The letter to the Philippians in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 25–28 in Year A. It is also heard in Advent, Lent and on Good Friday.

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind, That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:1–5

In Christ you have renewed all things and you have given us all a share in his riches.

Though his nature was divine,
he stripped himself of glory
and by shedding his blood on the cross
he brought his peace to the world,

Therefore he was exalted above all creation
and became the source of eternal life
to all who serve him.

PREFACE OF WEEKDAYS I

**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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the letter to the Philippians

*If there is anything you need,
pray for it, asking for it
with prayer and thanksgiving,
and that peace of God,
which is so much greater
than we can understand,
will guard your hearts
and your thoughts,
in Christ Jesus.*

PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7



2008–2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

St Paul's letter to the Philippians

This letter is written to one of those cities at the top end of Greece that were Paul's first European foundations. Like Thessalonica, it sat on the all-important Via Egnatia, linking East and West, and was very much a Roman city. You can read in Acts 16 about the foundation of the church, and the importance, at its beginnings, of Lydia, the influential business-woman.

The letter is written from prison, and, clearly, Paul was not sure that he would emerge alive from his captivity. Despite that, this is an astonishingly joyful letter, possibly the most cheerful that Paul wrote. And as you read, you may develop a suspicion that the Philippians were his favourite church. They were the only church from whom Paul accepted money (see 4:15-18), and it is just possible that Paul's wife lived there (see 4:3, where Syzygos might be a name, or might rather mean 'yoke-fellow').

Certainly joy flows through the letter, even though Paul has had a good deal to put up with; and this joy is not only because of Paul's affection for the Christians at Philippi, but also because of his passionate love of Christ. Death for him only means 'to depart and be with Christ'; and that seems a desirable enough option to him; but, on the other hand, he also wants to be able to serve the Philippians.

Not that all was perfect in the community. At the beginning of the second chapter, we overhear Paul exhorting them to 'think the same thoughts.' That leads him into the lovely 'hymn to Christ' (though not everyone agrees that it is a hymn), singing of Christ's refusal to regard 'equality with God' as 'a snatching-matter', and culminating in the powerful affirmation that 'therefore God super-exalted him, and gave him the gift of the name above every [other] name', and that 'every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.'

And Paul immediately follows this with an exhortation to 'work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling', in order to rejoice with him. We learn something, too, about Paul's co-workers Timothy and Epaphroditus, how they function as important intermediaries in Paul's relationship with this much-loved group of Christians.

Occasionally we hear a flash of anger from Paul (this is not unknown, of course, in some of his other letters!). See, for example, his remark about 'dogs' at 3:2; the tone here has led some scholars to suggest that in its present form, the letter is actually a compilation of several documents, but no two scholars can agree where the divisions come. As so often in Paul, the anger brings him to offer us a good deal

of autobiographical information (see 3:4-6). More importantly, it drives Paul to give powerful expression to his passionate love for 'Christ Jesus my Lord' (read slowly through 3:7-14). This leads quite naturally on to an exhortation to the Philippians to keep going: 'become co-imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and look at those who behave just like you have us as a model' (if that sounds awkward, you must blame Paul; but the point he is making is clear enough).

And two ladies of Philippi are being asked, perhaps with the assistance, as we have seen, of Mrs. Paul, to 'think the same thoughts in the Lord', which was precisely how he had introduced the 'hymn to Christ', back in chapter 2. He is obviously very fond of these ladies, whom he describes as 'fellow-athletes with me in the gospel', and does not spend long on this exhortation, preferring to move on to exhort the Philippians to rejoice and to pray; and then he thanks them for their generosity. It is a lovely letter, and you could well spend time reading it aloud to yourself.