

## 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.

*Another reason why we constantly thank God for you is that as soon as you heard the message that we brought you as God's message, you accepted it for what it really is, God's message and not some human thinking; and it is still a living power among you who believe it.*

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13

Father in heaven,  
Our hearts desire  
the warmth of your love  
and our minds are searching  
for the light of your Word.

Increase our longing  
for Christ our Saviour  
and give us the strength to grow in love,  
that the dawn of his coming  
may find us rejoicing in his presence  
and welcoming the light of his truth.

We make our prayer through  
our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you  
in the unity of and the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.

Liturgy  
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## *the 1st letter to the* Thessalonians

*May the God of peace  
make you perfect and holy;  
and may you all be kept  
safe and blameless,  
spirit, soul and body,  
for the coming of  
our Lord Jesus Christ.  
God has called you  
and he will not fail.*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23–24

### *The 1st letter to the Thessalonians in the Sunday Lectionary*

The first letter comes at the end of Year A on Sundays 29–33. It is also read in the season of Advent.



2008–2009  
YEAR OF  
ST PAUL

# St Paul's First letter to the Thessalonians

This is a fascinating document, because it is almost certainly the earliest surviving Christian writing; most scholars think that 1 Thessalonians was the first of Paul's letters, and that Paul was the first New Testament author to get his thoughts on paper (or papyrus), long before the first gospel was written.

Why did he write letters? Because he could not be everywhere, and his divine mission was to rush round the Mediterranean cities preaching about his beloved Lord Jesus and about the Resurrection. Precisely as for us, so for Paul (who would, no doubt, have made interesting use of the Internet, given half a chance), a letter was the best substitute for his actual presence when problems arose in the churches that he had founded. Now the Christians at Thessalonica were one of the first groups that he had gathered on his first arrival in Europe, up there at the top end of Greece (you can read about it in Acts 17). The city sat on the Via Egnatia, the important Roman road linking Greece to the Black Sea; and it had an excellent harbour, so there will have been a thoroughly multi-cultural community there.

The letter implies that the Thessalonian Christians had converted from pagan worship rather than from Judaism (although Acts speaks of Paul addressing the synagogue there). We cannot tell what

their social standing was. The Corinthian Christians evidently included people from all classes; but it is possible that the Thessalonians were largely poor. Certainly they were (as Paul had warned them) experiencing persecution, and the letter is in part intended to comfort them in the face of this unpleasantness.

In addition, Paul wants to congratulate them for the way they accepted the gospel when he first preached to them; but more important, for Paul, with his desire to have Jesus known everywhere, is the fact that reports of their good behaviour have spread all over Greece. Being Paul, he is not shy to remind them how hard he had worked when he was with them, and how tenderly he had loved them. And Paul's co-worker Timothy has been to visit them, to check on how things were going, and he has brought back an excellent report.

Not that they can relax and put their feet up. Paul wants them to keep growing, and particularly to avoid sexual sin (something that Paul absolutely abhorred). This might have been particularly important to mention if they had indeed come from paganism rather than Judaism. Jewish education was quite clear about regarding sex as something too important to be indulged in outside the bounds of marriage; but the pagan attitude was largely that of

Western Europe today, that it really doesn't matter at all. It might be useful for us to reflect on whether our culture has not lost something important by trivialising sex in this way.

There is also, however, the question of Jesus' return. His life, and particularly his Resurrection, meant for Paul that now we were in the end-time, and that Jesus would come back, at the moment when God would finally put everything to rights. There seems, however, to have been a question at Thessalonica about those who died before Jesus' return. Had they missed out? So Paul comforts the Thessalonians, in language drawn from Jewish apocalyptic, about the 'last trumpet' and the 'voice of the archangel'. This is not supposed to be a 'timetable' for the Second Coming, so much as an affirmation that God is indeed in charge, and a promise that therefore things will be all right, including for those who are lately dead. Indeed, Paul explicitly refuses to talk about 'times and seasons'. The Thessalonian Christians have to keep going, to work hard, and to continue to respect the leaders of the church. In addition, they are to 'be at peace' and happy, and to allow the Spirit, that powerful element in the early Church's experience of God, to speak; and they were and to revere those who had the gift of prophecy. It is a lovely letter, and it will be good to sit and read it through from beginning to end. It will not take you long.