

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 Galatians in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 9–14 in Year C.

You are, all of you sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26–28

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We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; through him we are saved and made free.

Entrance Antiphon. Holy Thursday
Roman Missal

**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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the letter to the Galatians

*I have been crucified with Christ,
and I live not now with my own life
but with the life of Christ
who lives in me.*

*The life I now live in this body
I live in faith;
faith in the Son of God
who loved me
and sacrificed himself for my sake.*

GALATIANS 2:19–20



2008–2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

St Paul's letter to the Galatians

In almost all of Paul's letters, he follows the custom in the ancient world of a thanksgiving very early on in the letter, before he gets down to business. This is not the case in the Letter to the Galatians. He is so cross with them that where you would expect him to be thanking God for their virtues we hear him instead saying, 'I am astonished that you have so rapidly switched your allegiance from the one who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel. But there is no other!'. Later on, he will bellow at them, 'You *stupid* Galatians', or, as a colleague of mine has suggested, 'You crazy Celts!' (3:1). And we wince when in response to those who want the Galatians to be circumcised he offers the crude wish that 'they might castrate themselves' (5:12).

Why is Paul so cross? It is not easy to be precisely sure what has gone wrong, but the basis of it seems to be this: Paul had preached a gospel of freedom to the churches of Galatia, which we are probably to locate somewhere in Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey. Then some people from Jerusalem, emissaries of James the brother of the Lord, seem to have arrived and told them that in order to be Christians it was after all necessary for them to be circumcised, and to observe the Jewish Law and Jewish feast-days, which was precisely what Paul had realised could not be demanded of his Gentile converts.

It looks as though some people had been claiming that Paul was not a real apostle, presumably because he was not one of the original Twelve, and because he had persecuted the Church; and, they argued, he had received his authority, not from God or from Jesus, but from human beings. This is why the letter begins, emphatically, 'Paul, an apostle, not from human beings, nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the father, who raised him from the dead.' (Galatians 1:1-2).

To counter this claim, Paul reveals a bit of his life-story; and we must reflect that we are very grateful to those who had so annoyed him that they provoked him into autobiography. He tells them (1:11-23) the story of his conversion, including the all-important fact (verse 16) that he grasped then and there that his task was to spread the gospel of Jesus to Gentiles, going beyond the boundaries of the historical people of God. He also narrates some details of his relationship with Peter and James, the brother of the Lord. Then in chapter 2 he talks about a subsequent meeting, at which this call to preach the Gentiles was vindicated, and presumably his teaching that they did not need to observe kosher rules, and Sabbaths, or be circumcised. Paul clearly fought his corner at this meeting (he was never one to give in limply at the first sign of opposition!). Paul reveals less than

total admiration for 'those who seemed to be something – it is of no matter to me what kind of people they were' (2:6) and what he calls the 'so-called pillars', by which he means James and Peter and John. But he insists that they agreed that preaching to the Gentiles was indeed his mission. He also narrates a fight that he had with Peter at Antioch, when he accused him of hypocrisy (read 2:11-14 for the details of that little passage of arms). Then Paul gets down to the argument. Later on, he will give a more carefully thought out version of it, in the Letter to the Romans; but it is worth reading through this first presentation of the case, in chapters 3 and 4, based on the position of Abraham, as Father to the Gentiles as well as first recipient of God's covenant. The argument is not easy, but it is worth going through slowly and trying to get the gist of it. What is on offer to Christians, he wants to insist, is nothing else than freedom in Christ, the fruit of the Spirit rather than the works of the flesh (see chapter 5). Paul ends this ill-tempered letter with a very firm instruction to the Galatians, 'For the rest, let nobody give me any hassle – for I am carrying the marks of Jesus on my body'. What he meant by this is anyone's guess; but, as always with Paul, notice how he always comes back to his beloved Jesus Christ. That is the real Paul, and we shall do well to follow him.