

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 2nd letter to the Thessalonians in the Sunday Lectionary

The second letter with its theme of the Day of the Lord comes at the end of Year C on Sundays 31–33.

We pray continually that our God will make you worthy of his call, and by powerful fulfil all your desires for goodness and complete all that you have been doing through faith; because in this way the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in you and you in him, by the grace of our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ

2 THESSALONIANS 1:11–12

Lord God of all the ages,
the One who is, who was,
and who is to come,
stir up within us a longing
for your kingdom,
steady our hearts in time of trial,
and grant us patient endurance
until the sun of justice dawns.

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
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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the 2nd letter to the Thessalonians

*May the Lord Jesus Christ himself,
and God our Father
who has given us his love
and, through his grace,
such inexhaustible comfort
and such sure hope,
comfort you and strengthen you
in everything good
that you do or say.*

2 THESSALONIANS 2:16–17



2008–2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

Second letter to the Thessalonians

One of the oddities about 2 Thessalonians is 1 Thessalonians. Sit down and read them both through (it will not take you all that long). As you do so, you will notice that they are very similar, and that both of them treat roughly the same issues in roughly the same order, in very similar language. The difficulty is that if they were both written by St Paul it is hard to find a plausible situation, given the rough outline of his ministry suggested by Acts of the Apostles, in which he might have written this second letter. Another difficulty is that 2 Thessalonians seems in some important ways different from 1 Thessalonians. For one thing, 2 Thessalonians gives a fairly precise timetable for the 'end', Jesus' second coming, and indicates that it cannot possibly take place until the 'rebellion' comes, and 'the lawless one is revealed'. There is not much indication of what these two rather alarming phenomena might be, but presumably those who first heard the letter read out in their assembly knew what the author was talking about. For another thing, the tone of 1 Thessalonians is warm and passionate, whereas that of 2 Thessalonians is a bit cold and aloof. Because of arguments of this sort, some people think that Paul cannot possibly have written 2 Thessalonians, although it is only fair to say that

there are perfectly reputable scholars who argue strongly that Paul wrote them both.

Actually it doesn't really matter *who* wrote 2 Thessalonians. The Church has long since decided that it has something to say to us, and therefore included it in the canon of our New Testament; and we often hear it read out at that slightly weary end-time of the year, before the new freshness of Advent comes upon us to cheer us up. What might it say to us today?

It seems to deal with two issues. First of all, some people have been saying that 'the Day of the Lord is already here'. In one sense, of course, this is true; Jesus has come on earth, has died, and been raised from the dead; but there was also a strong belief in the early church that Jesus was going to come again, possibly quite soon, as judge. And 2 Thessalonians is determined to insist on this aspect of the matter. Of course all New Testament documents are convinced that God's decisive intervention in Jesus has already taken place in the Incarnation and the Death and Resurrection of the Lord; it is just that some of them emphasise a future Second Coming more strongly than others.

The second issue is that some people, possibly because they thought that the second coming might be by next Tuesday

at the latest, have been putting their feet up and refusing to do any work. No human society can operate like that; and the Church is, among other things, very much a human society, so Paul, or whoever wrote this letter in his name, is very insistent that they must snap out of it and get down to work. His teaching about this problem can be summed up in the one line 'anyone unwilling to work should not eat', a sanction that many school-teachers would like to be able to invoke.

You might also notice that there was clearly already a problem about how one knew whether or not a letter was by Paul, for in 3:17 he gives them a sample of his own hand-writing (normally he dictated his letters), as an authenticating mark.

Some questions to assist your reading of this interesting letter:

- Does it matter to you if people have extreme views about Jesus' Second Coming?
- What do you believe about Jesus coming again? Do you think it might be next week, or doesn't it bother you at all?
- Is it important to keep on working, as 2 Thessalonians suggests? What are the advantages, and what are the disadvantages?
- Does it matter to you whether or not St Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians?