

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 Philemon in the Sunday Lectionary

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters and only occurs on one Sunday — 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C.

*I always mention you in my prayers
and thank God for you,
because I hear of the love
and the faith which you have
for the Lord Jesus
and for all the saints.
I pray that this faith
will give rise to a sense of fellowship
that will show you all the good things
that we are able to do for Christ.
I am so delighted, and comforted,
to know of your love;
they tell me, brother,
how you have put a new heart
into the saints*

PHILEMON 4-7

God,
source of every good gift
and sure foundation of our unity,
as we honour and revere Saint Paul,
grant your Church a share
in his zeal for preaching the gospel.
Strengthen our faith to be witnesses,
even unto death,
of the one Lord, Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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the letter to Philemon

*This is Paul writing,
an old man now
and, what is more,
still a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
I am appealing to you
for a child of mine,
whose father I became
while wearing these chains:
I mean Onesimus.
I am sending him back to you,
and with him — I could say
— a part of my own self.*

PHILEMON 9-10.12



2008-2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

St Paul's letter to Philemon

The letter to Philemon is an excellent place to begin reading St Paul, if you don't know Paul very well, or if you think that the little that you know rather puts you off him. It is a very short letter; some people call it a "charming post-card", though there is much more to it than that. It is also not very well known; it is hardly ever read in church, for some reason. And, unlike some of the other letters attributed to St Paul, there is absolutely no doubt that Paul wrote this one.

There are one or two questions about the letter. For a start, who was it addressed to? Traditionally we call it Philemon, but if you look at the opening, at least two other people, a man and a woman, are addressed, and many scholars argue that actually it is Archippus who is the recipient. Fortunately, that doesn't matter at all. Secondly, where is Paul writing from? He is, we learn, in prison (he mentions this fact no less than three times), but we don't know whether it was his imprisonment in Rome, at the end of his life (which might be suggested by the apparent reference to his being 'an old man'). Thirdly, what is the problem? Is Onesimus, the subject of the letter a) a runaway slave, which is the traditional view, or b) a messenger sent by Philemon (or Archippus) whom Paul finds so useful that he wants to keep him next to him in prison, or c) not a runaway slave,

but a slightly different class of character, a slave who has had a disagreement with his master, and who wants Paul to advance his side of the argument? Or, finally, is Onesimus d) not a slave at all, but a brother of Philemon (or Archippus)? In this case, 'brother' could mean both 'son of the same mother' and 'fellow-Christian'; and then the letter would be an attempt to reconcile two Christians who have quarrelled.

Actually, it does not matter very much which of these answers we adopt; but I suggest that you read slowly through the letter, and find out for yourself which answer works best for you.

Another question for today, as we have just celebrated the second centenary of the abolition of slavery in Britain, is that of Paul's attitude to that peculiar institution, whereby human beings are owned by other human beings, as though they were just 'things', like motor-cars or cricket bats. Again, read slowly through the letter, and see what you think. I'd like to suggest to you that if we take seriously the teaching that is implicit here, it is impossible for a Christian to defend the institution of slavery. Sadly, not all Christians have always taken that view.

And, finally, as you read the letter, ask yourself: could Philemon (or Archippus)

possibly have refused Paul's request? Interestingly, it is just conceivable that there is a little more to go on, for Ignatius of Antioch, at the beginning of the 2nd Century AD, knows of a bishop of Ephesus whose name is Onesimus. Was this the same man, released by his slave-master, in response to Paul's plea? We cannot possibly be certain about this, but it is a pleasing thought, as is the further refinement on this idea, that it might actually have been Onesimus, who in gratitude for what this great letter-writer had done for him, who collected the epistles of St Paul. What do you think?

There is one last thing that you might look out for as you read. The name 'Onesimus' means 'useful' or 'profitable', and in verse 20 Paul uses the word 'benefit', which his hearers would immediately have known was linked to the slave's name. Also, in verse 11, Paul speaks of Onesimus as having been once 'useless' and now 'useful'. These two words come from a different root, but when the letter was read out, the hearers would have recognised that the two words sounded like 'unChristian' and 'Good Christian'. This is a very clever piece of writing, enabling Paul to give expression to the passionate love for Christ that was the driving force of his entire life.