

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 Ephesians in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 15–21 in Year B.

I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you therefore to live a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together, There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all.

Ephesians 4:1–6

You have been enlightened
by Christ.

Walk always
as children of the light
and keep the flame of faith
alive in your hearts.
When the Lord comes,
may you go out to meet him
with all the saints
in the heavenly kingdom.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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the letter to the Ephesians

*Glory be to him
whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine;
glory be to him
from generation to generation
in the Church
and in Christ Jesus
for ever and ever.
Amen.*

EPHESIANS 3:20–21



2008–2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

St Paul's letter to the Ephesians

Ephesians is one of the loveliest documents in the entire New Testament, and the best thing that you can do is to sit down and read slowly through it. Many scholars feel that it could not have been written by Paul, for it seems too dependent on the Letter to the Colossians; but the odd thing is that everyone agrees that the author of Ephesians really understood Paul, and you might argue that the person best suited for that might well be the Apostle himself. The style is rather fuller than you find in the other Pauline letters; 1:3-14, for example is a single sentence (the longest sentence in the entire New Testament), although translations tend to break it up, out of compassion for the poor unfortunate reader.

It may have been a circular letter, because the words 'in Ephesus' (1:1) are not in the best or earliest manuscripts; there are none of the usual greetings with which Paul ends his letters. But we cannot be sure.

What should you look out for as you read it, or as you listen to it being read in church of a Sunday? Above all, listen out for the idea of God's plan, which the author refers to as 'mystery' (3:3). That plan includes 'us', the people of God, who have been 'adopted as sons [and daughters]' (1:5), and 'redeemed by his blood' (1:7). Look out also for what this text says about the Church, of which Christ is the 'head' (1:22), and 'which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills

all things in everything' (1:23). Notice the author's insistence that it is God who has done it all, and what a remarkable 'all' it is (2:4-10). So now those who were once outside may be said to belong, as 'no longer strangers and sojourners' (2:19). Read carefully through 3:1-13, where the author reflects on what Paul have been given to achieve in his ministry, and rejoice, not at what Paul has done, but at what God has done through him, 'this grace, to proclaim to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ' (3:8). Pray with Paul the lovely prayer that is 3:14-21 (another long sentence).

After that go slowly through chapters 4 and 5, where the author works out the implications of living out our Christian calling in the real world. As always with Paul, the pastoral solutions are deeply rooted in theology. So the addressees are to be united, not because unity is a good thing, but, more profoundly, because God and Christ and the Spirit are one (4:3-6). Within that, all Christians belong together, each with their own gifts to build up the body of Christ (4:11-16). That in turn means that certain kinds of behaviour are simply incompatible with Christian life (4:17-5:20). And it is in this context that we must read the 'household code' (5:21-6:9). It seems to be a fuller version of what is already in Colossians; but notice how it subverts the apparent insistence on the subordination

of wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters. For the author starts off (5:21) by insisting that they are **all** to be 'subordinated to each other in the fear of Christ'. It very soon (5:25) becomes clear that really Paul is talking about the relationship of Christ and the Church, and that all are equal before the Lord. Even when he speaks of slaves, the author undermines any notion that the slaves are inferior to their masters by the simple device of contrasting the word 'lords' with the one 'Lord' (6:5, 7-9), triumphantly concluding, 'knowing that both you and they (i.e. both slaves and slave-masters) have the Lord in heaven – and he has no regard for status.' There is no justification here for any division of human beings into inferior or superior classes.

In a charming final passage (6:10-17), the author uses the metaphor of putting on armour, whimsically linking the various bits of Roman armour with the virtues that Christians need if they are to live in the world. He ends with a characteristic insistence on prayer, on the mission of the apostle, the importance of news among Christians, and a beautiful last blessing (6:23-24): 'peace to the brothers and sisters, and love along with faith from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. May grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruptibility.' This is a lovely letter, one to come back to time after time.