

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 Titus in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter to Titus occurs three times in the Sunday Lectionary: on Christmas Day at Midnight and Dawn Masses, and on the Baptism of the Lord in the set of readings for Year C which were added with the second edition of the Lectionary.

God has saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our saviour. He did this so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.

TITUS 3:5-7

All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life.

Send your Holy Spirit upon us to be our helper and guide.

Give us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill us with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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the letter to Titus

*God's grace has been revealed,
and it has made salvation possible
for the whole human race.*

TITUS 2:11



2008-2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

St Paul's letter to Titus

If you attend Midnight mass or the Dawn mass on Christmas Day, the second readings you will hear are two remarkable “epiphany passages” taken from the letter to Titus. Titus is mentioned in Galatians 2 (he had been converted by Paul, but not forced to receive circumcision), and in 2 Corinthians chapters 2, 7, 8 and 12 (he had been an important and skilful messenger between Paul and his petulant Christians in Corinth). It is only fair to tell you that most scholars (not all) regard the Letter to Titus as a late composition, by someone other than Paul. They regard this letter as coming from a generation after that of Paul, trying to tell his audience “what Paul would be saying to us today”. The situation that the letter envisages is no longer that of the missionary days, that heady period of expansion; now we seem to be in a time of consolidation, when the problems are those of looking after a community that has been evangelised for some while, and needs to cope with threats to church order and true doctrine. In this sense, some people think of Titus as a kind of “early church manual”. It may be of interest to you to know that not a single church is dedicated to St Paul on the island of Crete; the reason for that is probably that the author was unwise enough to quote, at Titus 1:12, a 6th Century Greek poet to the effect that “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons”!

It is not absolutely clear whom the author has in mind as the threat to Church order; at times it looks as though they may be those who think we should return to the Judaism from which Christianity emerged, and at other times the opponents appear to resemble the “Gnostics” who would cause so much trouble for 2nd Century Christianity.

The two passages chosen for reading on Christmas Day both speak of the “appearing” of God: “for the grace of God has appeared, saving all”, and identifying that “appearance” with the life and death and second coming of Jesus: “who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds”, which includes a) Jesus’ death and its effects, and b) the ethical demands made of those who would be part of Jesus’ people. The reading at the Dawn Mass emphasizes, in true Pauline fashion, that what God has done (“when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared”) had nothing to do with any virtue of ours: “not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy”. And that notion is right at the heart of the Christian message, as is the author’s insistence on the importance of the Holy Spirit (whom the churches have so regrettably tended to

neglect): “the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

This is a message that is as alive today as it was when it was first written, whether or not it comes from the pen (or rather the dictation) of St Paul. Christmas is not the celebration of materialist consumerism that we have, all unwittingly, conspired to make it; Christmas celebrates the unconditional love of God, showered on undeserving humanity. That is something to celebrate.