

## 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 Colossians in the Sunday Lectionary*

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 15–18 in Year C.

*Since you have been brought back to true life with Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand. Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God. But when Christ is revealed—and he is your life—you too will be revealed in all your glory with him.*

Colossians 3:1–4

Praise to you,  
the God and Father  
of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who in your great mercy  
have given us new birth and hope  
through the power of Christ's resurrection.

Through the prayers of the apostle Paul  
may we who have received this faith  
through their preaching  
share their joy in following the Lord  
to the unfading inheritance  
reserved for us in heaven.

Roman Missal

**Liturgy  
Office**  
ENGLAND  
& WALES

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## *the letter to the Colossians*

*Let the message of Christ,  
in all its richness,  
find a home with you.  
Teach each other,  
and advise each other, in all wisdom.  
With gratitude in your hearts  
sing psalms and hymns  
and inspired songs to God;  
and never say or do anything  
except in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the Father  
through him*

COLOSSIANS 3:16–17



2008–2009  
YEAR OF  
ST PAUL

# St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Colossians is a mysterious letter, and one of the loveliest in the Pauline corpus. There are those who feel that it could not have been written by Paul, but sometimes it seems that this is because they find it 'a bit too Catholic'. If we are reading it in the Christian community, we need not worry too much about questions of authorship. Just read it.

As always, it starts with 'Paul', not as a mark of Pauline arrogance, but because that is the entirely practical manner in which letters started in the ancient world, 'an apostle of Christ Jesus'. Characteristically it goes on to give thanks, in this case for the Corinthians faith and love and hope (1:4-5). Then (9-14) he prays for them to grow in faith, which leads into the well-known hymn to Christ (15-20). Oddly enough, it may be that this was a hymn originally coming from pre-Christian sources, possibly in Colossae itself, and that it has been 'baptised' to insist on the importance of Jesus. As it stands it is a beautiful meditation on Jesus as the pivot on which, first, God's creation of the world, and, second, God's reconciliation of the world, turned. So it is a song about who Jesus is, and what God has done in him, and, not least, Christ's headship of 'the body, the Church'.

One of the difficulties of Colossians is that it looks as though some kind of doctrinal aberration had been going on there in

Colossae (see 2:16); but it is very hard to reconstruct it with any precision. There was something to do with 'food and drink and in respect of festivals or new moon or Sabbath', which may suggest that Paul's opponents represent some kind of Jewish group. More interesting to us, perhaps, as we watch him struggling with their difficulties, is how Paul solves problems. Again and again he comes back to his beloved Jesus Christ. So he tells them (2:18) 'the body belongs to Christ', or starts an argument with 'if you have died with Christ' (2:20), 'if you have been raised with Christ' (3:1); he prays 'let the peace of Christ referee in your hearts' (3:9) and 'let the message of Christ dwell richly in you'.

That may be the clue to the 'household code' which follows (3:18-4:1). A good many readers shift uneasily when they read all that stuff about 'women, be subordinated to the men... children, obey your parents in every respect... slaves obey your "lords"'. They fear that Paul is giving his consent to a tyranny of the strong over the weak. But notice that in fact he subtly undermines any pretensions to unquestioned authority. Husbands are instructed to 'love (!) [your] wives and not get bitter against them'. Parents are told 'not to provoke your children, so that they don't get depressed'. And slave-owners will shift uneasily in their seats in church as the slaves

are reminded that they are to 'work for the Lord, and not for human beings; be slaves of the Lord Christ'. That means, of course, that their slave-owners cannot possibly be their 'lords'; so Paul is deliberately playing on this word when he tells them, "Lords", give your slaves what is just and equitable, knowing that you people have a Lord in heaven'. Once you have listened properly to these words, you cannot sit comfortably with the idea that the husband, the parent, and the slave-master are always right. In Christianity, all members are equal before the Lord.

The letter then concludes with the usual exhortations and greetings; but notice that Paul insists on prayer (4:2-4), and on proper relationship with outsiders. Christians have to live on two planes, the relationship with God and with Christ, and the relationship with those who are not Christians. And make sure that you read the list of names (4:7-18); for at this point you can get a feel of what it was like to be a Christian in those far-off days, as various bits of information about those who are no more than names to us remind us of how very much they cared for each other, even when things were difficult. Christianity is for real people, living in the real world, and searching for that elusive God who has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.