

(*Colossians* 3:18 *Titus* 2:4-5). It needs to be carefully explained, particularly when this material is used in the liturgy, that such texts come from particular social and religious settings and must be read in the context of the whole of Scripture, and particularly in the light of the testimony of the gospels to Jesus' own inclusive attitudes and behaviour. These Pauline texts should never be used to undermine the dignity of women. In the Letter to the Ephesians we find an inspiring presentation of the mutual relationship of self-giving love of husband and wife, which is modelled on the love of Christ for the Church (*Ephesians* 5:21-33).

Christ and the Church

The letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians provide a more developed understanding of Christ and the Church. Christ is the first born of all creation, and, being the first born from the dead, he is the head of the Church (*Colossians* 1:15-20). Christ ends the division between Jew and Gentile so that all are one in the Body of Christ, the Church (*Ephesians* 3:5-6). The first and second letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus are sometimes considered to have been written by disciples of Paul. They provide useful guidance on the life of Christian communities, describing the ministries of bishops, elders and deacons, and the role of widows. These letters emphasise the need for fidelity to the Tradition.

THE GIFT OF SCRIPTURE 63-67

Year of St Paul

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The Gift of Scripture

A teaching document of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and of Scotland on the scriptures and to mark the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation from the Second Vatican Council. It was published in June 2005.

**Liturgy
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The Gift of Scripture can be downloaded from www.catholic-ew.org.uk and is published by the Catholic Truth Society [www.cts-online.org.uk/]. This leaflet is one of a series to mark the Year of St Paul prepared by the Liturgy Office, 39 Euston Square, London SW1V 1PL. © 2007 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture

the Gift of Scripture & St Paul

You must keep to what you have been taught and know to be true; remember who your teachers were, and how, ever since you were a child, you have known the holy scriptures — from these you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives, and teaching them to be holy.

2 TIMOTHY 3:14-16



The Gift of Scripture & St Paul

The apostolic preaching

The second work written by Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, takes the story further as the good news of Jesus is preached 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The account of the dramatic power of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost announces the birth of the Church. The speech of Peter is the first of many speeches in Acts, the focus of them all being the death and resurrection of Jesus and the consequent call to faith in him. Luke describes the early community as devoting themselves 'to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). It remains the call of Christ today that, by fidelity to the word, to the Eucharist and to prayer, we should live as a community of love reaching out in mission to the whole world. After the account of the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, we are introduced to Saul and his dramatic experience of the call of Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Saul, also known as Paul, is the 'chosen instrument' to bring the name of Christ to the nations (Acts 9:15). Meanwhile Peter too experiences a vision in which he learns that all peoples are to be welcomed into the Christian fold (Acts 10:34-35).

The journeys of Paul

Accounts of the three missionary journeys of Paul and his final journey to Rome are also found in Acts. During his second journey Paul, inspired by a vision, crosses into Europe (Acts 16:9-10). Paul and his companions often face persecution from the Jews and hardships

of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29). Paul thus proclaims the extraordinary gift of the new life of faith that Christ has brought by his death and resurrection, but he also leaves us in no doubt that we owe the beginnings, the roots of our faith, to Abraham and his descendants (*The Jewish People* 36).

Pastoral problems of the pauline churches

Paul, as we have seen in Romans, makes a major contribution to Christian understanding of Christ's person and work. He also addresses various problems faced by the Christian communities. In the first and second letters to the Thessalonians he reassures Christians about the resurrection of those who have died in Christ and dampens any excessive expectations of Christ's imminent return. In the Letter to Philemon Paul deals with the delicate problem of a runaway Christian slave returning to a Christian household. In the first and second letters to the Corinthians he addresses various pastoral concerns, including disunity in the community. Paul's teaching on the role of women has given rise to much debate, especially in our own time. Paul, on the one hand, encourages the ministry of women (Romans 16:1 *Philippians* 4:2-3) and speaks of the role of both women and men in Christian liturgical gatherings (1 *Corinthians* 11:4-5). Elsewhere in the first letter to the Corinthians we find an instruction that women should be silent at meetings (1 *Corinthians* 14:34-35). In the first letter to Timothy, sometimes considered to be the work of a disciple of Paul, scriptural justification is given for a lesser role for women (1 *Timothy* 2:12-15). Other texts deal with the relationship of husband and wife and seem to sanction a subordinate role for wives

of all sorts. It is Paul's mission to the Gentiles which is the main reason for Jewish opposition (*The Jewish People* 75). When hostility to him grows from the Jews of Jerusalem he appeals to the emperor and makes the hazardous sea journey to Rome. At the end of Acts the gospel message has reached Rome, capital of the empire and destined to become the heart of the universal Church.

Paul's mission and gospel

We gain a more direct testimony about St Paul from his letters. The genuine letters of St Paul were written long before the first written gospel and are consequently the earliest writings of the New Testament. Paul is totally convinced that he was 'set apart for the gospel of God' (Romans 1:1). He is called by Christ to preach 'the obedience of faith' to all the nations (Romans 1:5), among whom he includes the people of Rome, whom he calls 'God's beloved, called to be saints' (Romans 1:7). Paul is the apostle of the Gentiles, proclaiming faith in Christ 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Romans 1:16). For Paul, Christ is the fulfilment of the law (Romans 3:21-22 *Galatians* 3:24-26). Christians, baptised into new life, live by the law of the Spirit (Romans 8:2). Later in the Letter to the Romans Paul will consider the difficult issue of God's covenant with Israel. He employs the image of an olive tree. While some branches, the Jews who have not accepted Christ, have been removed, new 'wild olive shoots', the Gentiles, have been grafted onto the olive tree of Israel (Romans 11:17). Those who do not accept Christ remain beloved, however, 'for the gifts and the calling

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The letter to the Romans in the *Sunday Lectionary*

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 9–24 in Year A. It is also heard in Advent, Lent and at the Easter Vigil.

Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked. These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us.

For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angel, nor prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ROMANS 8:35. 37–39

God of infinite wisdom. You chose the apostle Paul to proclaim your Son to every nation.

We pray that these your servants, who look forward to baptism, may follow in the footsteps of Paul and trust not in flesh and blood, but in the call of your grace. Probe their hearts and purify them, so that, freed from all deception, they may never look back but strive always toward what is to come.

May they count everything as loss compared with unsurpassed worth of knowing your Son, and so gain him as their eternal reward, for he is Lord for ever and ever.

RITE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS

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the letter to the **Romans**

*The Spirit comes to help us
in our weakness.
For when we cannot choose the words
in order to pray properly,
the Spirit himself expresses our plea
in a way that could never
be put into words,
and God who knows everything
in our hearts
knows perfectly well what he means
and that the pleas of the saints
expressed by the Spirit
are according to the mind of God.*

ROMANS 8 26–27



2008–2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

St Paul's letter to the Romans

The letter to the Romans is remarkable in a number of ways. In the first place, it is Paul's longest (which is the only reason why it is printed first of the Pauline Letters in your New Testament). Secondly, there is a case to be made for regarding it as the most influential document in the whole Bible. Thirdly, it is very unusual in that it was written to a congregation that Paul did not know, but hoped to visit. And, fourthly, Paul is (unusually for him) doing his level best to be diplomatic; you can almost hear him treading on egg-shells.

Why did he write it, then? He himself gives three reasons: first, he wants to come and see the Christians in Rome (1:11-15 -- and see how careful he is in these verses not to imply that they might not have the full gospel). Second, he wants them to finance a missionary journey to Spain (15:24, 28). Thirdly, he wants their prayers, and perhaps an intervention on their part, to protect him from people in Jerusalem (15:31). These seem to have been of two kinds: Jews who were not Christians, who were offended by his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, and, secondly, Jewish Christians who were offended by what seemed to them his cavalier attitude towards the Jewish Law. Paul was a prickly character, not always guarded in what he says; and in the Letter to the Galatians, which is by some way the angriest of his extant epistles, he said some really quite regrettable things. This seems to have

account of God's love by giving us who are not Jews grounds for confidence. This leaves unresolved the question of what happens Paul's fellow-Jews; has God changed his mind about them? And so in chapters 9-11 Paul offers some very dense argument to show that they too are part of God's loving plan. The rest of the chapters in various ways apply this love-story to the situation in Rome (a situation, we gather, of some tension between Christians of Jewish origin and those of non-Jewish origin), explaining how they are to treat each other (with love), what they are to do about paying taxes to the Roman authorities (pay them), what to do when different sections of the church hold differing views about dietary laws (look out for the interests and concerns of the other). Then, towards the end of chapter 15, Paul speaks of his plans; and then comes chapter 16. Have a good look at this, if for no better reason than that it is never read out in church, and see how careful he is to emphasise that there are people in Rome who can vouch for him, and likewise people in Corinth (where he is dictating the letter) who are known to the Roman Christians, and who can speak on his behalf. But all the time remember: we are talking here of a love-story, which is Paul's love for Jesus (whose "slave" Paul proudly pronounces himself in the very first line of the letter), Jesus' love for his body, the Church, and God's love for a largely hostile world. That is the clue to reading this extraordinary epistle.

offended some Jerusalem Christians, to a point where Paul feared that they would not accept the collection that he had made for them among the wealthier churches of Greece and Asia Minor; and for Paul the collection was a very important sign of the unity of Christians.

So in the Letter to the Romans Paul rehearses the argument of Galatians, but without the intemperate language. Boil it down to its essentials, and the Letter to the Romans is a love-story, rehearsing the "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek". It is the story of God's love for humanity in Jesus Christ. So we don't have to deserve the love of God; we cannot possibly *deserve* it, merely respond in "faith" or "trust" or "commitment" (the word can be translated in a number of different ways). To make his argument, Paul starts by making the point that our world (whoever we are) is in a mess, and requires God's intervention; and then he makes them think (in chapter 4) about the person of Abraham as a prime example of the recipient of God's unconditional love; he was not loved because he was circumcised, for he had received God's loving promise *before* he was circumcised. The argument hereabouts is rather difficult, and will make your head spin; but try seeing it as a love-story and it gets easier. Then in chapters 5-8 Paul continues his

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We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity: not a philosophy of our age, it is true, still less of the masters of our age, which are coming to their end. The hidden wisdom of God which we teach in our mysteries is the wisdom that God predestined to be for our glory before the ages began. It is a wisdom that none of the masters of this age have ever known, or they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory; we teach what scripture calls: the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–9

God,
teach us the hidden
wisdom of the gospel,
so that we may hunger
and thirst for holiness,
work tirelessly for peace,
and be counted among those
who seek first the blessedness
of your kingdom.

The 1st letter to the Corinthians in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter is proclaimed at the beginning of Ordinary Time in each of the three cycles:

- A chapters 1–4 (Sundays 2–8);
- B chapters 6–11 (Sundays 2–6);
- C chapters 12–15 (Sundays 2–8).

the 1st letter to the Corinthians

*Just as the human body,
though it is made up of many parts,
is a single unit
because all these parts,
though many, make one body,
so it is with Christ.
In the one Spirit
we were all baptised,
Jews as well as Greeks,
slaves as well as citizens,
and one Spirit was given to us
all to drink.*

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12–14



2008–2009
YEAR OF
ST PAUL

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St Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians

Corinth was a funny old place. It was a port city, with all the vices and virtues of such places; it was socially very diverse, with a high proportion of slaves and ex-slaves. And it was international. The city lay on an important trunk-route between the East and Rome, where all commerce eventually tended to find its way. So it was hard-nosed, streetwise, and (at least by reputation) sexually uninhibited. So you would not predict success for a Christian missionary there. Not surprisingly, Paul tells us that he arrived "in fear and in much trembling", after (according to Acts 17) a minor disaster in Athens, which must have seemed a far more likely place than Corinth to be receptive to his message.

Surprisingly enough, he found a ready hearing in Corinth, possibly because he quickly formed a relationship with two Jewish Christians, tent-makers like himself, the husband and wife team of Aquila and Priscilla. He stayed there 18 months, and then kept in contact with the church he had founded in Corinth, after he had moved on. The reason for the contact was that the Corinthian Christians had not really grasped what he was on about, and tended (at least when Paul was not present among them) to despise him for not being a clever enough speaker, and not having enough "knowledge". So they wrote him a slightly self-satisfied

letter, and we can imagine them waiting complacently for his admiring reply. What they get must have shaken them greatly: they are told that they were not "wise... powerful... of noble birth", but "weak... low and despised... and things that are not". There were several problems among the Church in Corinth; but the main one was simply that they were divided, and for Paul Christianity is not Christianity if it is divided. So it is in this letter that for the first time Paul sketches his famous image of the Church as the "body of Christ", all of whose parts belong together, none of which is superior to the other.

So we can imagine their shock when, instead of responding admiringly to their self-praise, Paul makes them wait a whole seven chapters (almost halfway through the letter) before condescending to answer their letter. Instead, he lays into them for forming factions, especially a Paul versus Apollos faction, for immaturity, for permitting incest, for litigation against each other, and for fornication. Picture the situation as this letter was read out; listen to the shocked silence in the room where the church gathered, and try to reconstruct what it must have been like to hear that powerful tirade let loose upon them.

When finally he comes to answering their questions, he makes it clear that they are not the important questions that they should have been asking. Though he has quite strong views on sexual morality, and on relations with other religions, and on whether it is permissible to eat food offered to idols (which was the cheapest way to get access to meat), what really counted was the things that divided them. This was what made questions about sex and meat-eating important, and this was what gave the edge to a question about what women should wear when praying or prophesying (and we notice, in passing, that Paul makes no distinction between the liturgical functions of women and men). What Paul will not have at any price (and here he once again shatters their complacency) is anything that divides the People of God: it is not, he bellows, the Lord's supper if some people start eating early, while others go hungry; nor if some people speak in tongues which others cannot understand. What counts is telling the truth about Jesus; and most especially, telling the truth that Jesus is risen from the dead. It is an extraordinary letter, written for particular purposes nearly two thousand years ago, but echoing down the centuries, still as fresh as the day when it was written.

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The 2nd letter to the Corinthians *in the Sunday Lectionary*

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 7–14 in Year B.

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, and holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. So we are ambassadors for Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:17–20



Father of mercies
and God of all consolation,
you do not wish the sinner to die
but to be converted and live.

Come to the aid of your people,
that they may turn from their sins
and live for you alone.

May we be attentive to your word,
confess our sins, receive your forgiveness,
and be always grateful
for your loving kindness.

Help us to live the truth in love
and grown into the fullness of
Christ your Son,

who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Rite of Penance

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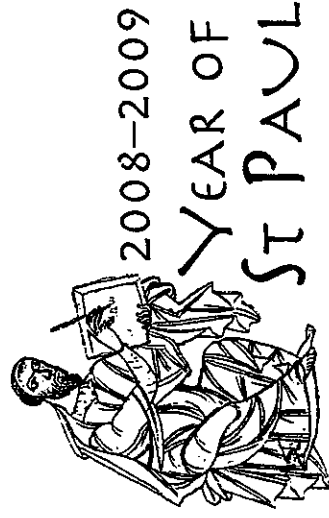
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the 2nd letter to the **Corinthians**

*Blessed be the God and Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ,
a gentle Father
and a God of all consolation,
who comforts us in all our sorrow,
so that we can offer others,
in their sorrows,
the consolation that we have received
from God ourselves.*

2 CORINTHIANS 1: 3–4



St Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians

One of the difficulties about 2 Corinthians is that it may be several different letters, all by Paul, and all addressed to Corinth, but put together in a slightly haphazard manner. So if you sit down and read it all the way through, that will explain why you may feel that it doesn't seem to 'hang together' all that well. It is nevertheless a fascinating document, and well worth reading reflectively.

The background seems to be that Paul had written 1 Corinthians, partly in response to the Corinthian divisions that he had heard about, and partly to answer some questions that they had put to him in a letter of their own. Paul's letter did not quite do the trick, however; some people were offended by Paul's tone (he gets a bit sarcastic in places in 1 Corinthians). So they were ready to listen to opponents of Paul who arrived in Corinth and announced that Paul was not a 'real apostle'. There were things that they could point to, of course: he had not been one of the Twelve, and he had, on his own admission, persecuted the Church. There was also another reason that may strike you as rather odd: some in Corinth had criticised him because he had refused to accept money for doing the work of the gospel! That is not generally a reason for criticising church leadership. So Paul went back to Corinth, and that visit was a disaster; Paul was publicly insulted (see 2 Corinthians

2:5-6), and subsequently wrote the Corinthians a 'tearful letter', which caused them great pain, as you will see if you look at 2 Corinthians 7:8-13. Some people think that this letter may have been what you find at 10:1-13:10, although others simply think that this 'tearful letter' has been lost. Certainly the tone seems to change rather suddenly at the beginning of chapter 10. But we cannot be sure, and most readers will prefer simply to take the letter as it stands.

What should you be looking out for as you read through this document? Possibly the first thing to notice is the emphasis on 'affliction' and 'comfort' (though different translations will give various versions of these words). For Paul, both affliction and receiving comfort in affliction are an important part of Christian ministry. The second thing is to observe that Paul's ministry has been under attack, and that he is quick to defend himself. So at 1:15-2:4 he is repelling the charge of not 'walking the talk'; he had promised to come to Corinth and failed to turn up. Then in chapters 3:1-6:2 he deals with various charges that they have been making against him in Corinth. In chapters 7-9, he is trying to persuade them to be generous in the matter of the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. This was a matter of some importance to Paul, because the brethren there had nothing to live on; and for Paul

you could not call yourself a Christian if you did nothing to help those in need. But the Corinthians, who were certainly not short of cash, had proved very reluctant to put their hands into their pockets.

As we said above, the tone changes at chapter 10, where Paul deals with the charges that have been made by those who thought that they were 'real apostles'. Paul invents a ringingly contemptuous phrase for them, which we might translate as 'super-duper-apostles'. Then, in chapters 11 and 12, because he has got so cross with them, he gives us some precious autobiographical details, a thing that he only does when he is annoyed. So we must be grateful to his opponents who provoked him into revealing his ancestry (11:22), his sufferings (11:23-29), and, in an extraordinary passage that you should read very closely indeed, his mystical experiences (12:1-6). And it is typical Paul that he then goes on to talk about his 'thorn in the flesh' (12:7-10). No one knows what it was, though suggestions have included sexual temptations, epilepsy, blindness and even a literal 'thorn in the flesh'!

In 2 Corinthians, partly because he is so annoyed, we learn a good deal of intensely personal material about Paul; read this letter carefully, and use it to get to know this remarkable Apostle, warts and all.

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You are, all of you sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26–28



We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; through him we are saved and made free.

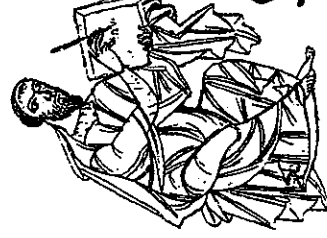
Entrance Antiphon. Holy Thursday
Roman Missal

the letter to the **Galatians**

*I have been crucified with Christ,
and I live not now with my own life
but with the life of Christ
who lives in me.*

*The life I now live in this body
I live in faith;
faith in the Son of God
who loved me
and sacrificed himself for my sake.*

GALATIANS 2:19–20



2008–2009
**YEAR OF
ST PAUL**

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The letter to the Galatians
in the Sunday Lectionary

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 9–14
in Year C.

St Paul's letter to the Galatians

In almost all of Paul's letters, he follows the custom in the ancient world of a thanksgiving very early on in the letter, before he gets down to business. This is not the case in the Letter to the Galatians. He is so cross with them that where you would expect him to be thanking God for their virtues we hear him instead saying, 'I am astonished that you have so rapidly switched your allegiance from the one who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel. But there is no other!' Later on, he will bellow at them, 'You *stupid* Galatians, or, as a colleague of mine has suggested, 'You crazy Celts!' (3:1). And we wince when in response to those who want the Galatians to be circumcised he offers the crude wish that 'they might castrate themselves' (5:12).

Why is Paul so cross? It is not easy to be precisely sure what has gone wrong, but the basis of it seems to be this: Paul had preached a gospel of freedom to the churches of Galatia, which we are probably to locate somewhere in Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey. Then some people from Jerusalem, emissaries of James the brother of the Lord, seem to have arrived and told them that in order to be Christians it was after all necessary for them to be circumcised, and to observe the Jewish Law and Jewish feast-days, which was precisely what Paul had realised could not be demanded of his Gentile converts.

It looks as though some people had been claiming that Paul was not a real apostle, presumably because he was not one of the original Twelve, and because he had persecuted the Church; and, they argued, he had received his authority, not from God or from Jesus, but from human beings. This is why the letter begins, emphatically, 'Paul, an apostle, not from human beings, nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the father, who raised him from the dead' (Galatians 1:1-2).

To counter this claim, Paul reveals a bit of his life-story; and we must reflect that we are very grateful to those who had so annoyed him that they provoked him into autobiography. He tells them (1:11-23) the story of his conversion, including the all-important fact (verse 16) that he grasped then and there that his task was to spread the gospel of Jesus to Gentiles, going beyond the boundaries of the historical people of God. He also narrates some details of his relationship with Peter and James, the brother of the Lord. Then in chapter 2 he talks about a subsequent meeting, at which this call to preach the Gentiles was vindicated, and presumably his teaching that they did not need to observe kosher rules, and Sabbaths, or be circumcised. Paul clearly fought his corner at this meeting (he was never one to give in limply at the first sign of opposition!). Paul reveals less than

total admiration for 'those who seemed to be something – it is of no matter to me what kind of people they were' (2:6) and what he calls the 'so-called pillars,' by which he means James and Peter and John. But he insists that they agreed that preaching to the Gentiles was indeed his mission. He also narrates a fight that he had with Peter at Antioch, when he accused him of hypocrisy (read 2:11-14 for the details of that little passage of arms). Then Paul gets down to the argument. Later on, he will give a more carefully thought out version of it, in the Letter to the Romans; but it is worth reading through this first presentation of the case, in chapters 3 and 4, based on the position of Abraham, as Father to the Gentiles as well as first recipient of God's covenant. The argument is not easy, but it is worth going through slowly and trying to get the gist of it. What is on offer to Christians, he wants to insist, is nothing else than freedom in Christ, the fruit of the Spirit rather than the works of the flesh (see chapter 5). Paul ends this ill-tempered letter with a very firm instruction to the Galatians, 'For the rest, let nobody give me any hassle – for I am carrying the marks of Jesus on my body'. What he meant by this is anyone's guess; but, as always with Paul, notice how he always comes back to his beloved Jesus Christ. That is the real Paul, and we shall do well to follow him.

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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

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

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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 on 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.

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The letter to the Philippians
in the *Sunday Lectionary*

The letter is proclaimed over Sundays 25–28 in Year A. It is also heard in Advent, Lent and on Good Friday.

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:1–5

In Christ you have renewed all things and you have given us all a share in his riches.

Though his nature was divine, he stripped himself of glory and by shedding his blood on the cross he brought his peace to the world. Therefore he was exalted above all creation and became the source of eternal life to all who serve him.

PREFACE OF WEEKDAYS I

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the letter to the Philippians

*If there is anything you need,
pray for it, asking for it
with prayer and thanksgiving,
and that peace of God,
which is so much greater
than we can understand,
will guard your hearts
and your thoughts,
in Christ Jesus.*

PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7



2008–2009
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St Paul's letter to the Philippians

This letter is written to one of those cities at the top end of Greece that were Paul's first European foundations. Like Thessalonica, it sat on the all-important Via Egnatia, linking East and West, and was very much a Roman city. You can read in Acts 16 about the foundation of the church, and the importance, at its beginnings, of Lydia, the influential business-woman.

The letter is written from prison, and, clearly, Paul was not sure that he would emerge alive from his captivity. Despite that, this is an astonishingly joyful letter, possibly the most cheerful that Paul wrote. And as you read, you may develop a suspicion that the Philippians were his favourite church. They were the only church from whom Paul accepted money (see 4:15-18), and it is just possible that Paul's wife lived there (see 4:3, where Syzygos might be a name, or might rather mean 'yoke-fellow').

Certainly joy flows through the letter, even though Paul has had a good deal to put up with; and this joy is not only because of Paul's affection for the Christians at Philippi, but also because of his passionate love of Christ. Death for him only means 'to depart and be with Christ'; and that seems a desirable enough option to him; but, on the other hand, he also wants to be able to serve the Philippians.

Not that all was perfect in the community. At the beginning of the second chapter, we overhear Paul exhorting them to 'think the same thoughts'. That leads him into the lovely 'hymn to Christ' (though not everyone agrees that it is a hymn), singing of Christ's refusal to regard 'equality with God' as 'a snatching-matter', and culminating in the powerful affirmation that 'therefore God super-exalted him, and gave him the gift of the name above every [other] name', and that 'every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father'.

And Paul immediately follows this with an exhortation to 'work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling', in order to rejoice with him. We learn something, too, about Paul's co-workers Timothy and Epaphroditus, how they function as important intermediaries in Paul's relationship with this much-loved group of Christians.

Occasionally we hear a flash of anger from Paul (this is not unknown, of course, in some of his other letters!). See, for example, his remark about 'dogs' at 3:2; the tone here has led some scholars to suggest that in its present form, the letter is actually a compilation of several documents, but no two scholars can agree where the divisions come. As so often in Paul, the anger brings him to offer us a good deal

of autobiographical information (see 3:4-6). More importantly, it drives Paul to give powerful expression to his passionate love for 'Christ Jesus my Lord' (read slowly through 3:7-14). This leads quite naturally on to an exhortation to the Philippians to keep going: 'become co-imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and look at those who behave just like you have us as a model' (if that sounds awkward, you must blame Paul; but the point he is making is clear enough).

And two ladies of Philippi are being asked, perhaps with the assistance, as we have seen, of Mrs. Paul, to 'think the same thoughts in the Lord', which was precisely how he had introduced the 'hymn to Christ', back in chapter 2. He is obviously very fond of these ladies, whom he describes as 'fellow-athletes with me in the gospel', and does not spend long on this exhortation, preferring to move on to exhort the Philippians to rejoice and to pray; and then he thanks them for their generosity. It is a lovely letter, and you could well spend time reading it aloud to yourself.

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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

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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



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

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.

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

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The 1st letter to the Thessalonians in the Sunday Lectionary

The first letter comes at the end of Year A on Sundays 29–33. It is also read in the season of Advent.

Another reason why we constantly thank God for you is that as soon as you heard the message that we brought you as God's message, you accepted it for what it really is, God's message and not some human thinking; and it is still a living power among you who believe it.

¹ THESSALONIANS 2:13



Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our minds are searching for the light of your Word.

Increase our longing for Christ our Saviour and give us the strength to grow in love, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth.

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.

The 1st letter to the Thessalonians

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called you and he will not fail.

¹ THESSALONIANS 5:23–24



2008–2009
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St Paul's First letter to the Thessalonians

This is a fascinating document, because it is almost certainly the earliest surviving Christian writing; most scholars think that 1 Thessalonians was the first of Paul's letters, and that Paul was the first New Testament author to get his thoughts on paper (or papyrus), long before the first gospel was written.

Why did he write letters? Because he could not be everywhere, and his divine mission was to rush round the Mediterranean cities preaching about his beloved Lord Jesus and about the Resurrection. Precisely as for us, so for Paul (who would, no doubt, have made interesting use of the Internet, given half a chance), a letter was the best substitute for his actual presence when problems arose in the churches that he had founded. Now the Christians at Thessalonica were one of the first groups that he had gathered on his first arrival in Europe, up there at the top end of Greece (you can read about it in Acts 17). The city sat on the Via Egnatia, the important Roman road linking Greece to the Black Sea; and it had an excellent harbour, so there will have been a thoroughly multi-cultural community there.

The letter implies that the Thessalonian Christians had converted from pagan worship rather than from Judaism (although Acts speaks of Paul addressing the synagogue there). We cannot tell what

their social standing was. The Corinthian Christians evidently included people from all classes; but it is possible that the Thessalonians were largely poor. Certainly they were (as Paul had warned them) experiencing persecution, and the letter is in part intended to comfort them in the face of this unpleasantness.

In addition, Paul wants to congratulate them for the way they accepted the gospel when he first preached to them; but more important, for Paul, with his desire to have Jesus known everywhere, is the fact that reports of their good behaviour have spread all over Greece. Being Paul, he is not shy to remind them how hard he had worked when he was with them, and how tenderly he had loved them. And Paul's co-worker Timothy has been to visit them, to check on how things were going, and he has brought back an excellent report.

Not that they can relax and put their feet up. Paul wants them to keep growing, and particularly to avoid sexual sin (something that Paul absolutely abhorred). This might have been particularly important to mention if they had indeed come from paganism rather than Judaism. Jewish education was quite clear about regarding sex as something too important to be indulged in outside the bounds of marriage; but the pagan attitude was largely that of

Western Europe today, that it really doesn't matter at all. It might be useful for us to reflect on whether our culture has not lost something important by trivialising sex in this way.

There is also, however, the question of Jesus' return. His life, and particularly his Resurrection, meant for Paul that now we were in the end-time, and that Jesus would come back, at the moment when God would finally put everything to rights. There seems, however, to have been a question at Thessalonica about those who died before Jesus' return. Had they missed out? So Paul comforts the Thessalonians, in language drawn from Jewish apocalyptic, about the 'last trumpet' and the 'voice of the archangel'. This is not supposed to be a ' timetable' for the Second Coming, so much as an affirmation that God is indeed in charge, and a promise that therefore things will be all right, including for those who are lately dead. Indeed, Paul explicitly refuses to talk about 'times and seasons'. The Thessalonian Christians have to keep going, to work hard, and to continue to respect the leaders of the church. In addition, they are to 'be at peace' and happy, and to allow the Spirit, that powerful element in the early Church's experience of God, to speak; and they were and to revere those who had the gift of prophecy. It is a lovely letter, and it will be good to sit and read it through from beginning to end. It will not take you long.

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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 power 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.

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
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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?

Year of St Paul

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'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 letters to Timothy

in the Sunday Lectionary

The first letter to Timothy is read from Sundays 24--26 in Ordinary Time Year C and followed by the second letter on Sundays 27–30.

My advice is that, first of all, there should be prayers offered for everyone — petitions, intercessions and thanksgiving — and especially for kings and others in authority, so that we may be able to live religious and reverent lives in peace and quiet. To do this is right, and will please God our saviour: he wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth.

¹ TIMOTHY 2:1–4

Christ Jesus was made visible in the flesh, attested by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed to the pagans, believed in by the world, taken up in glory.

¹ TIMOTHY 3:16



God our Father, you gave your saint, Timothy, the courage and wisdom of the apostles:

may his prayers help us to live holy lives and lead us to heaven, our true home.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

the letters to **Timothy**

If we have died with Christ, then we shall live with him.

If we hold firm, then we shall reign with him.

If we disown him,

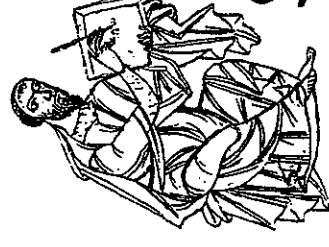
then he will disown us.

We may be unfaithful,

but he is always faithful,

for he cannot disown his own self.

² TIMOTHY 2:11–13



2008–2009
YEAR OF
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St Paul's letters to Timothy

These two letters, with the letter to Titus, are often lumped together as the "Pastoral Letters". Some people say that this is not very helpful, as it makes us see all three of them as the same sort of thing, whereas in fact they are very different. So the first thing that I should like you to do is to read through the two letters addressed to Timothy, looking out for their differences and their similarities.

If you do that, one thing that you may notice is that 1 Timothy is much more about how to run a church (by which I mean an assembly of Christians, not the building in which they assemble), and 2 Timothy is much more personal and intimate. In addition, 2 Timothy is written from prison, though it does not say where Paul's captivity was. Acts of the Apostles tells us of an imprisonment at Caesarea Maritima, on the coast north-west of Jerusalem, and another in Rome; and some scholars argue that Paul was also imprisoned at some point in Ephesus, in what is Turkey today; but this letter is not telling us which if any of these incarcerations the author has in mind.

You may also notice that 1 and 2 Timothy are also rather different from other Pauline letters, such as Romans and Corinthians. Now of course that might mean that Paul was writing for a rather different situ-

ation; or it might be, as some scholars argue, that it was not Paul who wrote these letters, but someone else, in a later generation, dealing with a situation where the Christian Church had become more established, and needed more permanent structures to keep going in a largely hostile world. You will see, for example, that both these letters contain quite a lot of instruction on Church discipline, and on the appointment of church officers; so by the time these letters have been written, there is the familiar three-fold structure of bishops and presbyters and deacons, and there is not really very much of that sort of thing in Paul's earlier letters.

The point seems to be that in these "Pastoral" Epistles we can see the Church struggling with new challenges, and changing to face a very different situation from that of its earliest years. As you read these letters, you might like to ask yourself how in your experience the Church grows and develops; and how it learns by tackling new problems.

One of the things that happens is that of 'modelling'; so in these letters you will notice how Paul takes Jesus as his 'model', and in turn offers himself as a role-model for Timothy. Another development is that we find rules being laid down for different sections of the community: you will find

instructions for men, women, bishops, deacons, widows, elders, slaves, and the wealthy. In the earliest days of the Church there was much more emphasis on the equality of all in the body of Christ, and although this has not been lost, we can feel the group of Christians turning (inevitably, perhaps) into an institution, in which officials are appointed by the laying-on of hands. This is particularly true of 1 Timothy; 2 Timothy, you will find, is more personal and less institutional; but both of them speak of the 'deposit of faith' and of various church structures. They are also notably less fiery than the earlier Pauline letters, and show much more emphasis on ordered living, and on the need to make the Church acceptable to outsiders.

Some questions to consider:

- Do you notice any differences between 1 and 2 Timothy?
- Do you think that these "Pastoral Letters" have a different tone from those of Paul's earlier period?
- 1 and 2 Timothy have particular opponents in view, and give instructions on how to deal with them. Do you think that the Church today has dangerous enemies? If so, what should we do about them?

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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.

the letter to **Titus**

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

TITUS 2:11



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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 underserving humanity. That is something to celebrate.

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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.

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



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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 'un-Christian' 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.