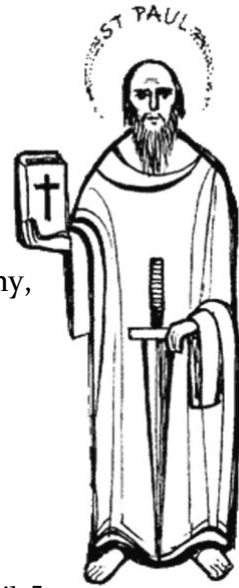


The Year of St Paul 2008–2009

The letter to the Philippians

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.



Phiippians 2:1-5

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.

This letter is written to one of those cities at the top end of Greece – 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. Acts 16 tells of the foundation of the church, and the importance, at its beginnings, of Lydia, the influential businesswoman:

There one night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and begged him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" When he awoke, he told us of this vision and we understood that the Lord was calling us to give the Good News to the Macedonian people.

So we put out to sea from Troas and sailed straight across to Samothrace Island, and the next day to Neapolis. From there we went inland to Philippi, the leading city of the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. We spent some days in that city.

On the sabbath we went outside the city gate to the bank of the river where we thought the Jews would gather to pray. We sat down and began speaking to the women who were gathering there. One of them was a God-fearing woman named Lydia from Thyatira City, a dealer in purple cloth.

As she listened, the Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying. After she had been baptized together with her household, she invited us to her house, "If you think I am faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us to accept her invitation.

The letter is written from prison. Clearly Paul was not sure that he would emerge alive from his captivity, but despite this it's an astonishingly joyful letter, possibly the most cheerful Paul wrote.

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 (Phil 4:15- 18), and it's just possible that Paul's wife lived there too (Phil 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 by any means!

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', singing of Christ's refusal to regard 'equality with God' as 'a thing to be grasped', and culminating in the powerful affirmation that 'therefore God highly-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'.

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 community of Christians. Occasionally we hear a flash of anger from Paul (See, for example, his remark about 'dogs' at Phil 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).

As so often in Paul, the anger brings him to offer us a good deal of autobiographical information (Phil 3:4-6). More importantly, it drives him to give powerful expression to his passionate love for 'Christ Jesus my Lord' (Phil 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 Paul's wife, to 'think the same thoughts in the Lord', which was precisely how he had introduced the 'hymn to Christ' in chapter 2. He's obviously very fond of these ladies, whom he describes as 'fellow-athletes with me in the gospel', and doesn't 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's a lovely letter, and you could well spend time reading it aloud to yourself.

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