

# The Year of St Paul 2008–2009

## St Paul – The Man

Paul was born in Tarsus, a Roman city, which is now in eastern Turkey. Here, he had contact with very diverse cultures: Greek, Roman, and Jewish. This served him well when he took up his mission to the Gentiles. Paul acknowledges that he was trained rigorously in the Law and, as a Pharisee, was prepared to teach and interpret the Law. Strict keeping of the Law was for Paul the way to live the Covenant. This made him a zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ, whom Paul saw as a threat to the Law. There are several aspects of Paul's life and writings that might give us a moment to pray and reflect, and also prepare us to join the Church in keeping this Year of Paul: his vocation/conversion, his realization that grace is a gift, the Church as the Body of Christ, and the sense of equality and dignity of all in Christ.



*From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*

1 Corinthians v1

## Vocation & Conversion

*As he travelled along and was approaching Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?" And he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice replied, "I am Jesus whom you persecute.*

Acts 9:3

**Most of us are familiar with the story in Acts 9 of how Paul fell to the ground dazzled in blinding light, and asked by the risen Lord why he was persecuting him. The impression that's given is that he just stood up and started preaching. In truth, that wasn't true. In the Letter to the Galatians (1,11-21), he tells a story that makes more sense and should remind us that time is an important part of conversion and vocation.**

*I went off to Arabia; later I returned to Damascus. Three years later I went to Jerusalem (Galatians 1,17).*

**The call was like a seed planted that needed time to take root and grow, so, too, with us. Time in the desert of prayer and reflection is needed for us to be able to answer our call from the Lord. Without this, our replies to the call to follow the Lord can easily be short-lived and/or superficial.**

## Grace as Gift

Paul describes himself as a Pharisee. Strictly keeping the Law and following its prescriptions were part and parcel of the life and teaching of the Pharisees.

Paul seems to be one of them. However, there's a temptation in being faithful to prescriptions – think of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The temptation to think that we either save ourselves or that God owes us for our faithfulness is easy to embrace.

Imagine what it must have been like for Paul to discern that grace is a free gift you can't *earn*; you need only *accept it*.

*Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they're justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith*

Romans 3:23-25

For Paul, the gift was something to accept in gratitude.  
Even today, we need to live our lives with similar gratitude.

## Image of the Church

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul sets out the image of the Church rooted in the Eucharist: the Body of Christ. In the Eucharist, we receive the Body of Christ and, by receiving it, we become the Body of Christ and we show ourselves to be the Body of Christ. Even in the earliest years of the community, gathered around the Eucharist, he sees the intricacy of the community made up of many parts working in harmony, held together by the Spirit with Christ as its head.

All members of the body are indispensable for the body to function well. God has so constructed the body . . . that all the members may be concerned for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer with it; if one member is honoured, all the members share its joy (1 Corinthians 12:25-26).

Another point he makes is that the Eucharist will not be authentic unless the community lives the Gospel authentically . . .

*To continue with my advice, I cannot praise you, for your gatherings are not for the better but for the worse. First, as I have heard, when you gather together, there are divisions among you and I partly believe it. There may have to be different groups among you, so that it becomes clear who among you are genuine. Your gatherings are no longer the Supper of the Lord, for each one eats at once his own food and while one is hungry, the other is getting drunk. Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or perhaps you despise the Church of God and desire to humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say? Shall I praise you? For this I cannot praise you.*

*This is the tradition of the Lord that I received and that in my turn I have handed on to you; the Lord Jesus, on the night that he was delivered up, took bread and, after giving thanks, broke it, saying, "This is my body which is broken for you; do this in memory of me." In the same manner, taking the cup after the supper, he said, "This cup is the new Covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do it in memory of me." So, then, whenever you eat of this bread and drink from this cup, you are proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore, if anyone eats of the bread or drinks from the cup of the Lord unworthily, he sins against the body and blood of the Lord.*

*Let each one, then, examine himself before eating of the bread and drinking from the cup. Otherwise, he eats and drinks his own condemnation in not recognizing the Body. This is the reason why so many among you are sick and weak and several have died. If we examined and corrected ourselves, the Lord would not have to exercise judgment against us. The Lord's strokes are to correct us, so that we may not be condemned with this world.*

*So then, brothers, when you gather for a meal, wait for one another and, if someone is hungry, let him eat in his own house. In this way you will not gather for your common condemnation. The other instructions I shall give when I go there.*

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Times don't change all that much, do they?

We haven't been much better at achieving unity than our forebears. Paul still speaks to us.

## Equality in Christ

All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Therefore, there does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ (Galatians 3:27-29). Paul sums up the dignity of baptism as well as any theologian over the course of the Christian era. We, who are sons and daughters of God, are heirs by God's divine plan. St. Leo the Great spoke to the Christians of Rome at a later time: Christians, remember your dignity! Paul kept reminding the community of this dignity and to act accordingly. How important that message is even today!

## Paul was a real person of courage.

He was a strong and faithful Jew who accepted the One whom he had wanted others to reject.

Preaching without fear, he challenged the early Church to be authentic and even challenged Peter when he thought he needed it. Over the course of time, Paul would see his life drawn more and more into the life of Christ through the cross. I have been crucified with Christ and the life I live is no longer my own; Christ is living in me (Galatians 2:19-20).

In the end, he felt driven to preach the gospel: I am ruined if I do not preach it (1 Corinthians 9:16). Paul can be a great model for us all, and when we begin to wonder if we can actually do what we are called to do, Paul reminds us of the words that came to him from the Lord: My grace is enough for you! (2 Corinthians 12:7).