



THE YEAR OF ST. PAUL

MAKING FRIENDS WITH PAUL

First in a Series

April 26, 2009

The *Acts of the Apostles* and Paul's own letters provide us with a wealth of detail about the life of St. Paul—more than we have about any other apostle, with the possible exception of Peter. We know that Paul (his Jewish name was 'Saul') was from Tarsus, a large, multicultural city in what is now Turkey. Raised in the strict observance of the Jewish faith, he was in fact a Pharisee, one of those rigid and correct observers of the Law with whom Jesus so often found himself in conflict. Paul persecuted the followers of "the Way" until his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

A well-educated man, Paul spoke several languages, knew the Hebrew scriptures intimately, and was familiar with Greek rhetorical devices as well. We also know that Paul was a working man, a tentmaker (Acts 18: 3). Even when he was traveling and preaching he continued to support himself by the work of his hands (1 Thess. 2: 9). In describing his own background, Paul revealed his great pride in his Jewish roots: "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee, in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless" (Philippians 3: 5).

The *Acts of the Apostles* and Paul's letters also tell us much about Paul's life after his conversion to Jesus Christ. Though some were at first suspicious of this persecutor-turned-apostle, Peter and the others soon came to acknowledge the genuineness of Paul's call, especially his call to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul, in turn, acknowledged the special role of Peter, and visited Jerusalem to consult with him several times. But Paul did not hesitate to challenge Peter when he felt



The image is from a 9th-century manuscript from the Monastery of St Gall and is believed to be one of the earliest European depictions of St Paul.

he was wrong, particularly on the status of Gentiles in the new faith. While some insisted that non-Jewish believers must observe the entire Jewish law, Paul argued that this was an unnecessary burden—and Peter and the others eventually saw things Paul's way.

Paul was constantly on the move, and both the *Acts of the Apostles* and his letters provide detailed evidence of his missionary journeys, which took him from end to end of the ancient world, from Athens to Rome. Sometimes with other disciples, and sometimes alone, Paul preached the good news in small towns and large cities. In some places the message flourished; in others Paul endured sharp

persecution for the faith. (For Paul's own account of all he went through for the faith, see 2 Corinthians 11: 24-27.)

The *Acts of the Apostles* concludes with Paul awaiting sentence in Rome. Tradition tells us that he was beheaded there around the year 62, during the reign of Nero. Over his remains rose one of the oldest Christian basilicas, that of Saint Paul outside the Walls. Recent archeological excavations beneath the Basilica, which has been rebuilt a number of times over the centuries, have confirmed the presence of the Apostle's tomb below the papal altar.

St. Paul the Writer

Though he wrote no Gospel, Paul's New Testament letters have had an incalculable impact on the Church. The late Raymond Brown, SS, one of the greatest scripture scholars of the last century, said it definitively: "Next to Jesus Paul has been the most influential figure in the history of Christianity." The range of his letters,



A dramatic 19th-century representation of St. Paul stands outside the Basilica of St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls, where his relics are venerated.

wrote Father Brown in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, “plus the depth of his thought and the passion of his involvement, have meant that since his letters became part of the New Testament, no Christian has been unaffected by what he has written. Whether or not they know Paul’s works well, through what they have been taught about doctrine and piety, all Christians have become Paul’s children in the faith.”

Paul’s letters—which scholars tell us predate all four of the Gospels by a dozen years or more—laid the groundwork for all Christian creeds and theology. They have shaped the very vocabulary we use to talk about our faith: Paul was “the first to coin a Christian meaning for the words apostle, gospel, charism, ministry,” writes Pauline scholar Carolyn Osiek. Paul’s letters have helped us to understand who Jesus is: truly human, and truly divine. They have opened up for us the meaning of the salvation Christ won for us on the cross.

More than anything else, perhaps, these letters addressed to struggling Christian communities continue to teach us what it means to live together as Christians. In his letters to far-flung communities Paul variously flatters, cajoles, mocks, mourns, instructs, condemns, pleads, and prays. He is at his harshest in writing to the Galatians, near the Black Sea: “I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel,” he says roundly in the opening lines of this letter (1:6). He is at his gentlest, perhaps, in his letter to Philemon, in which he begs Philemon to receive Onesimus, a wayward slave, with forgiveness: “I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.... if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me” (12, 17). To Timothy, a nervous young bishop, he is full of good

advice: “Stop drinking only water, but have a little wine for the sake of your stomach” (1 Timothy 5: 23). If Paul was hard on wayward Christian communities, he was equally hard on himself. He never hesitated to use his own story to reveal the amazing grace of God. “You heard of my former way of life,” he told the Galatians, “how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (1:13). “I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle... but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective.” (1 Corinthians 14:10)

Paul was never one to avoid controversy, and his teachings on some subjects—especially the role of women—have sparked controversy through the years. But even as we struggle with these teachings, we should be open to the other side of St. Paul, the Paul who envisioned a Church so united, organic, and open to the Spirit that we are still coming to terms with all that might mean: “to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.... you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it” (1 Corinthians 12: 7, 27). One thing is certain: Paul will continue to teach, to challenge, to cajole, and to inspire as his letters are proclaimed in the liturgy day after day.

—Corinna Laughlin

Prayer for the Year of St. Paul

*Glorious Saint Paul,
Apostle to the Gentiles,
when the Lord called, you answered,
and you spread the good news of the Gospel
to the very ends of the earth.*

*Pray for us,
that we may serve Christ as you did:
proclaiming the name of Jesus
in good times and bad,
when convenient and when inconvenient.*

*Pray for us,
that we may welcome all the people we meet
with compassionate hearts and open minds.*

*Pray for us,
that Christ may live in us
as he lived in you.*

*We pray in the name of the One
who is your Lord and ours,
Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.*

This is the first in a series of bulletin inserts about Saint Paul in celebration of the Year of St. Paul. The Jubilee Year will conclude June 29, 2009.