

PAUL

A PRELIMINARY NOTICE

For the **Jubilee Year of Paul** (late June 2008 to late June 2009), I plan to offer each month a reflection (about ten pages or so) with some suggested further reading. I would like to give a resume of current thinking about Paul's life and principal letters, with an interpretation that shows what sort of person he was and what sort of life he lived. These reflections are cumulative, and offer a step-by-step entry into a larger understanding of Paul.

A minor clarification: this Jubilee Year is being promoted as a celebration of 2000 years since the birth of Paul. Some historians put his birth some time between 7 and 10 ce. Many others put it at 6 bce, so that a celebration of 2000 years since his birth, now, would be about 14 years too late. The exact date is not the point: the point is the emergence of the figure of Paul in the ancient world, and our need to recognize that figure in our world. That is perhaps why the Latin document from the Vatican that initiates this Jubilee Year is a little broader in its terms of reference. It notes that '*saeculo XX expleto*' ('the 20th century being finished') since the time Paul '*in terra ortus est*' ('arose on earth'), which suggests that 2000 years have gone by since Paul 'was around', and that we need to think of Paul again.

The purpose of this year, as outlined by the Pope, is to **recover the figure of Paul for a large public today, a public for whom Paul is largely unknown**. It is also to promote a recovery of the sense of **Christian identity**, in its novelty, and in its continuity with Israel. 'Christian' identity is a broader term than, say, 'catholic' identity: it includes all the Christian denominations and professions of faith that venerate Paul. The balance of novelty and continuity between Christian origins (in Paul) and Israel is a focal point of ecumenical interest. Patriarch Bartholomeos of Constantinople has joined Pope Benedict in presiding over the beginning of this special year.

It seems worth proposing a study of Paul, even if it were not a Jubilee Year of Paul. Older discussions between Reform and Roman Catholic traditions (about justification, and faith and works) are fading into the past, especially since the Augsburg agreement between these confessions in 1999. There is a **'new perspective'** and more recently still, a **'fresh perspective'** on Paul. They allow a re-reading of the texts, in the light of the **political** context in which Paul lived and so of the **experience** of Paul and the **key ideas** he lived by. It is time for a good, critical, socio-historical look at Paul and his writings.

As we shall see each month, there are many facets to Paul. I think it is important at the beginning to see Paul as an **interpreter**. He interpreted the tradition of Jesus in such a way as to let Christianity develop into a universal religion. He was specially endowed with gifts to do this. He knew how to network, and make many collaborators active around him and after him. He was a man of two cultures. He knew how to apply ritual to daily life (as Pharisees liked to do in Jewish culture), and he knew how to think dialectically and present questions rather than permanent answers (as Stoic philosophers taught students, in the school of Tarsus itself).

He liked saying it as he saw it. His attitude to life accentuates rupture, shock, even at a level that is scandalous, or absurd. He gets into and past contradictions! He preached a fragile Messiah (which no Jew could understand). He preached the key to the meaning of the universe, not in a theory of cosmic harmony, but in the reality of a dead body on a cross. He said these things because his own life had been stood on its head when he met the risen Jesus.

He felt, as a result, a need to formulate Christian identity as 'open' identity. He knew that access to the real God did not depend on your ethnic background, your family history, your sexual preference, or your religious performance. That is why it was unconditional. That is why it was a discipleship of equals. That is why diversity was at its heart. Paul refused to locate Christian identity within a narrow, closed group that distanced itself from the surrounding cultures. He never demonized those cultures. He entered into debate with them. He did not set up a sect, but an open church. A closed community is a cul-de-sac: being in it is like being in a tomb. Paul took his distance from any nation, or city, or empire, or territory, or social class, in fact from anything particular that claimed absoluteness that no one could touch. More still: from any presentation of God that was like that. He saw in all those things the work of imagination, fuelled by a psychological need to create an 'absolute' of its own. That is why he could not make even Jewish Law (Torah) or Roman life (Caesar) 'the' answer, and he always thought there was more to life than either obeying or disobeying anything. To keep your openness when faced by so many such constructs you need to 'think' – 'do not conform to the present age [whenever you live], but be transformed by a renewal of your thinking' (Rm 12,2). Paul makes you think!

The program (and schedule) for these reflections will be:

For July 2008, **Preliminary notice.**
 For August 2008, **Introducing the historical Paul.**
 For September 2008, **Amplifying the life of Paul: Paul in Acts.**
 For October 2008, **Contextualizing Paul: Romans, Jews, God-fearers, Christians.**
 For November 2008, **Experiencing the Crucified-Risen One: the key to Paul.**
 For December 2008. **Writing to Macedonia: 1 Thessalonians and Philippians.**
 For January 2009, **Failing in Athens (Acts).**
 For February 2009, **Writing to Achaia: 1 and 2 Corinthians.**
 For March 2009, **Writing to Anatolia: Galatians.**
 For April 2009, **Writing to the Capitol: Romans.**
 For May 2009, **Writing to other places: Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians.**
 For June 2009. **Interpreting Paul politically today.**

The most recommended materials for follow-up around this series of reflections are:

OVERALL

J.D.Crossan and **J.L.Reed**, In Search of Paul: how Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004.

M.Gorman, Reading Paul, Eugene Oregon, Cascade Books, 2008..

H. Koester, Paul and his World, Fortress, 2007, especially chapter 1, Paul's proclamation of God's justice for the nations.

FOR EACH MONTH

For August and September, 2008, **J.Murphy-O'Connor**, Paul, his Story, Oxford University Press, 2004.

For October, 2008, J.D.**Crossan** and J.L.**Reed**, In Search of Paul: how Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004. See especially the 'overview'; 'first justice, then peace'; 'the normalcy of Imperial Divinity'; 'the challenge of Kenotic Divinity'. R.**Horsley**, Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society, Trinity Press International, 1997. N.T. **Wright**, What Saint Paul Really Said, 1997, Eerdmans, chapter 4, Paul and Jesus.

For November, 2008, M.**Gorman**, Reading Paul, Eugene Oregon, Cascade Books, 2008..
M.**Gorman**, Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross, Eerdmans, 2001.

For December, 2008, and January 2009, H.**Koester**, Cities of Paul: Images and Interpretations from the Harvard New Testament Archeology Project, (900 photos on CD-ROM), Augsburg-Fortress, Dec.2004.

For February, 2009, M.**Finney**, Christ Crucified and the Inversion of Roman Imperial Ideology in 1 Corinthians, Biblical Theology Bulletin, 2005, 20-33. J.D.**Crossan** and J.L.**Reed**, In Search of Paul, 2004. See especially sections 'bodily resurrection', 'we belong to the day', 'social patronage and street frontage', 'wise power or foolish weakness', 'power and the Eucharist'

For March, 2009, N.Thomas **Wright**, The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology, in Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology, ed. Joel Green and Max Turner, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000.

For April, 2009, P.F.**Esler**, Conflict and identity in Romans: the social setting of Paul's letter, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2003. N.Thomas **Wright**, Paul and Caesar, a New Reading of Romans, in A Royal Priesthood: the Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically, ed. C.Bartholomew, Carlisle, Paternoster, 2003. J.**Fitzmyer**, Spiritual Exercises based on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004.

For May, 2009. P.**Trebilco**, The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 166, Tubingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2004. Review, RBL 02/2005 Michael Kaler.

For June, 2009, J.D.G.**Dunn**, The Cambridge Companion to St.Paul, Blackwell, 2003. A.-J. **Levine**, A Feminist Companion to Paul, New York, T&T Clark, 2004.

Nothing therefore 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 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, no angel, no 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 of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rm 8, 35-39

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him, to

receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Rm 11, 33-36

Philippi was the first place in Europe to which Paul came. Later he wrote a letter to the Philippians. Lyons was the first place in France to which Christianity – Pauline Christianity – came. To celebrate the opening of the Year of Paul, there has been a public reading of the letter to the Philippians in the Cathedral of Lyons. In it Paul says:

It is a great joy to me, in the Lord, that at last you have shown some concern for me again....

A small museum in Colmar, in Alsace, is home to the Isenheim altarpiece, painted between 1510- and 1515 by an artist traditionally (but incorrectly) known as Grunewald. Martin Buber called it 'the altar of the spirit in the western world'. The outskirts of the large painting show the darkness of a world-encompassing night. In the centre is the large image of a human being tortured to death by the state, with the sanction of religious orthodoxy. There is an immense, weighty figure of the dead Jesus. And then, in the resurrection scene, a magnificently serene, dematerialized Christ, a body reconstituted as overpowering light, is enveloped in a rainbow-splitting sunburst....

Paul is not far from Colmar...he has just put all the scenes together. He saw the Risen One, and he put all the scenes of his life together.

I have attached the panel of the risen Jesus from the Isenheim altarpiece.

SOME QUOTATIONS ABOUT PAUL

'the reason the Lord had been unable to grant the sons of Zebedee thrones on his right and left in his kingdom was that one place was reserved for Paul' (Henry Chadwick)

'The plain truth is that we find this man a perfect pest...' (Tertullus prosecuting Paul before Felix, Acts 24, 5)

'Paul is simply the most dramatic and influential figure in western history' (Robert Orlando, filmmaker, speaking of his new documentary, *Paul: the Greatest Story NEVER told.*)

'a new generation of Scripture scholars is challenging many of the commonplace assumptions about who Paul was and what his teachings meant' (K. Woodward, *How to Read Paul 2000 Years Later*, Newsweek, Feb.29, 1988, p.65)

'a poetic and mystical genius capable of construing a multifarious, impressive and exciting theological complex...the most imaginative and creative writer among the authors of the New Testament...a brilliantly gifted organizer without whose contribution Christianity would not exist or would be something totally different' (G.Vermes, The Changing Faces of Jesus, Penguin, 2001)

‘The most successful religious teacher history has seen’ . ‘The first true Christian who didn’t know Jesus in the flesh’ (B.Chilton)

‘were it not for Paul, Christianity very likely would have remained a small sect within Judaism’ (K.Armstrong)

‘Christianity would have died out without him’ (E.Stourton)

‘Paul never anticipated that people in the 21st century were going to be his audience. He had no idea of it, because he thought the world was going to end.’ (P.Eisenbaum)

‘l’avorton de Dieu’ - ‘the very least of the apostles’ (Paul himself)

‘If you ask me what Jesus would have said to Paul, I think he would have said, ‘Thank you’.’ (Dominic Crossan)

‘the real Paul is the reel Paul, the fisher of ignorant and deceived humanity, who keeps his audience reeling as he enmeshes them in a web woven of ambiguous, cunning and deceptive words...His apocalyptic God is a mysterious, ambiguous, and finally sophistic God, who cares enough to be cunning and is devoted enough to be deceptive.’ (Mark Given)

‘a thoroughgoing Mediterranean person, functioning as a change agent among Israelites living in minority communities around the Greco-Roman world’ (Richard Rohrbaugh)

‘Christian literature begins for us today with the letters of Paul the Apostle.....The earliest Christian documents preserved as independent entities are the letters of Paul....Paul is the creator of the apostolic letter that served as a model for subsequent early Christian letters’ (Moreschini-Norelli_

‘However frequently one encounters distasteful attitudes in Paul’s epistles, these moments are irrelevant. They should be treated as epiphenomenal, like a rain shower occurring in the face of a volcanic eruption. Whatever his rebarbarative moments, Paul seems to me to be the character who is most authentically defined of all the figures we find in the Tanakh, the New Testament, and the Talmuds. Paul is a jagged, flawed, and therefore totally convincing human being. And, unlike everyone else in the scriptures and the Talmuds, he has left us writings that are not merely ascribed to him by others, but are unassailably his own creation. Saint Paul we meet in person; and when we finally become at ease with his angular personality, he talks to us in his oblique way of the historical Jesus and starts us on an historical pilgrimage that is pure joy.’ (Donald Akenson, Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus)

‘the real founder of the world religion which bears the name of Christianity’ (G.Vermes)

‘He is the most accurate reporter available on early Christianity, and gives the clearest view of the primeval church. He is an intellectual in a storm, a man in constant overdrive, traveling the Mediterranean world, firing off letters, troubleshooting conflicts. He is a mystic and a theologian, a voluble street fighter, a man busy on many fronts, often harried, sometimes exasperated. Always willing to plunge into a melee. He was not anti-Semitic: he serves the Jewish God, and speaks from Hebrew texts. He was not anti-women: he honoured them as equals, in liturgy and in life. He praised female leaders like Phoebe, Chloe and Junia, he alluded to female prophets in Corinth, he commissioned couples like Priscilla and Aquila. He did not tell women to keep quiet

and learn in submission (I Tim is a forgery, I Cor is an interpolation.) Who was he, and what did he do?' (G.Wills, What Paul Really Meant)

'Reading Paul's letters is like looking over the shoulder of a stranger to read letters written to people you don't know by someone you have heard very little about...' (M.Bird)

'It is never easy to comprehend the mind of any figure of past history, belonging to a society with assumptions very different from our own. But in some surprising way it seems even more difficult to do this when that figure is a man who, long dead though he is, retains a living power to move us; when he is a man whose problems are at least in part our problems; and whose problems are ours in no small degree because of the way he wrote about them. That is to say that whether we like it or not and whether we know it or not, he is part of our very selves. Our minds and consciences are different from what they would have been had he never lived.' Henry Chadwick, The Enigma of St.Paul

'Paul taught people to sing Jesus music' (Tom Wright)
