

# INTRODUCING ST PAUL

## THE MAN, HIS MISSION & HIS WRITINGS

### *Overview of St Paul's Letters*

*Apart from Jesus, St Paul is the most prominent personality in the New Testament. Thirteen of the twenty seven books of the New Testament bear his name. These letters were the first books of the New Testament to be written and offer a unique insight into the beginnings of the Church and how they understood the meaning of the life and death of Jesus in their own lives. Although we listen to fragments of these letters almost each time we gather for Sunday Mass often we know little about the context in which they were first composed and so can find them difficult to understand.*

*This leaflet, the first in a series of 8 leaflets on the Letters of St Paul, aims to introduce you to the apostle's life and writings. Subsequent leaflets in the series will seek to give a brief introduction to each of letters of the 'apostle to the gentiles.'*

### *Who was St Paul?*

We have two sources for learning about Paul's life: his own letters and Acts of the Apostles which was written some twenty year after his death.

Our most direct and reliable source of biographical detail can be gleaned from Paul's own writings. Although he tells us little of his life before his conversion, Paul does give us some important information. He establishes his identity as a Jew and more specifically informs us that he was a Pharisee, that is to say, a member of the Jewish religious group that sought to practice holiness by a strict adherence to the Jewish law (the Torah). Such was Paul's zeal as a Pharisee that he confesses he actively persecuted the first Christian communities whom he regarded as a threat to the holiness of Israel.

Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, supplies biographical information about Paul not found in his letters and is the basis for many of our Christian traditions concerning the apostle's life. It is Acts for example that identifies Tarsus (in the south east of modern day Turkey) as Paul's birthplace and his originally being named Saul. Acts likewise refers to Paul studying under Gamaliel I, the leading Pharisee scholar of his day; Paul's supporting himself by tent-making during his travels and Paul's family possessing Roman citizenship. However these details are never confirmed in Paul's own writings and there is no way of verifying their historical accuracy.

### *Paul's Experience of the Risen Christ*

In both Acts and his own letters, Paul's life can be divided into two contrasting parts. In the former, he was a devout Pharisee who zealously persecuted the early Christians; in the latter, he was the outstanding missionary

of the early Church who successfully implanted the Christian faith in non-Jewish territories and established the first Christian churches in Europe. The decisive event that transformed Paul from zealous persecutor into an indomitable missionary was what he, in his own words, describes as an experience of a “revelation” of the risen Christ near Damascus (Gal 1:12) which scholars date to approximately 35CE.

The author of Acts describes the experience more dramatically as a blinding vision in which the risen Christ speaks directly to Paul. Acts underscores the importance of the episode in the life of the early Church by narrating it three times.

Whatever the exact nature of this crucial experience it convinced Paul of two essential truths that were to shape the rest of his life: firstly, that Jesus was indeed the true Messiah that Israel had been waiting for and secondly, that he, Paul, had been personally called and commissioned by God to be an apostle of Christ to the Gentiles—that is to say, to all peoples outside of the Jewish faith.

### *Paul the Missionary*

After his personal experience of the risen Christ Paul himself tells us that he spent three years in Arabia and Damascus but gives no details of what he did during that period. After this period he tells us that he went to Jerusalem and spent fifteen days with Peter and James, brother of Jesus. Thereafter Paul tells us that he spent time in Syria and Celicia presumably engaged in missionary activity. However it is only in Acts of the Apostles that we find a detailed account of Paul’s missionary endeavours.



**First Missionary Journey:** Antioch - Salamis - Paphos - Attalia - Antioch (in Asia Minor) - Iconium - Derbe - Iconium - Antioch - Attalia - Antioch.

**Second Missionary Journey:** Tyre - Sidon - Antioch - Tarsus - Derbe - Lystra - Antioch (In Asia Minor) - Troas - Phillippi - Thessalonica - Berea - Athens - Corinth - Ephesus - Cos - Caesarea - Jerusalem.

**Third Missionary Journey:** Antioch - Iconium - Ephesus - Philippi - Thessalonica - Berea - Athens - Corinth - Troas - Mitylene - Miletus - Cos - Patara - Tyre - Ptolemais - Caesarea - Jerusalem.

According to Acts, after his visit to Jerusalem, Paul joined the Church community at Antioch (in Syria) and acted as a missionary alongside Barnabas on his **first missionary journey** to Cyprus and Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). The route of their journey can be traced using the map at the foot of the page. Although they began their journeys by preaching in the Jewish synagogues their main successes were among non-Jews. According to Acts it was when the opposition from the Jewish community became more pronounced that Paul focussed his mission more directly on Gentiles.

Scholars calculate that sometime around 46 CE Paul began a more extensive independent journey, his **second missionary journey**, that took him through Galatia, Macedonia and Achaia (modern day Greece) where he established Christian communities in the main urban centres he visited. Some five years later Paul returned again to Jerusalem, this time for the first 'council' of the early Church. This 'council' or 'conference' was called to discuss the issue of Gentile converts and whether or not they should be obliged to follow all the requirements of the Jewish Law, such as circumcision and special regulations about 'clean' and 'unclean' foods. Acts presents the Council as reaching an amicable compromise whereby Gentiles were not obliged to be circumcised but were bound to observe certain provisions of the Jewish law regarding sexual misconduct and what foods it was permissible to eat. In his own writings however Paul insists that he yielded to no such demands and strenuously defended that Gentile converts be accepted without any such conditions.

After the council in Jerusalem Paul undertook another extensive tour, his **third missionary journey**, returning first to Antioch and then moving on to Ephesus, Macedonia, Ilyricum, and Corinth, finally preparing once more to return to Jerusalem bringing with him the proceeds of a collection among the communities he visited to help the poor in the Christian community in Jerusalem. During this third missionary journey Paul spend lengthy periods of time based in Corinth (eighteen months) and Ephesus (two years) and scholars believe that most of Paul's letters come from this period of his missionary work.

Even by today's standards, Paul's missionary journeys represent an enormous undertaking measuring thousands of miles. Taking into account the perils and hardship involved in travel in the first century CE, the bitterness of the opposition and persecution he was forced to endure and the deep sadness he obviously felt even time he had to bid farewell to a community he had helped to establish, it is little wonder that Paul continues to be celebrated as one of the great missionaries of the Church down the ages.

### *Arrest and Journey to Rome.*

According to Acts, Jewish resistance led to Paul's arrest when he returned to

Jerusalem and he was held as a prisoner for two years in Caesarea. Exercising his birthright as a Roman citizen he appealed to have his case heard in Rome.

What finally became of Paul is not recounted in either Acts or his own letters. Acts ends its story with Paul under house arrest in Rome but still free to proclaim the gospel there. From his own writings we know that he harboured hopes even then of making a missionary journey to Spain. Christian tradition, dating back to the first century, holds that both Peter and Paul were executed in Rome under the emperor Nero, sometime in the 60's CE.

## PAUL'S LETTERS

Whilst thirteen letters in the New Testament bear Paul's name there is considerable discussion amongst biblical scholars and historians as to whether Paul actually wrote all thirteen. There is general agreement that seven letters are genuinely Pauline: Romans, 1& 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. The other six divide into two groups: those which in the view of *most* scholars Paul probably did not write, namely Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians and those which nearly all scholars believe Paul did not write: 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus.

*The fact that later Christian authors attributed their works to Paul shows in what high esteem his teaching was held. This practice, termed **pseudonymity**, was common in the ancient world as a way of giving authority to one's writing.*

<i>Letters written by Paul</i>	ROMANS 1 & 2 CORINTHIANS GALATIANS PHILLIPIANS 1 THESSALONIANS PHILEMON
<i>Letters probably not written by Paul</i>	2 THESSALONIANS EPHESIANS COLOSSIANS
<i>Letters definitely not written by Paul</i>	1 & 2 TIMOTHY TITUS

### *Paul's motive for writing*

The New Testament offers clear evidence that Paul used letters to substitute for his own presence in a given community. It is also clear that such letters were composed to respond to particular situations or crises that a community faced and which had come to Paul's attention. Thus the letters represent Paul's attempts to continue to advise and guide the community when it was not possible



for him to be present in person. Romans is the only letter addressed to a community that he had not yet visited. Paul's sense of responsibility for these communities that he had founded is very clear in his letters. He is quick to reprimand them whenever he thought they had strayed from the gospel he preached. But he also cared deeply for the communities and at one point compares himself to a nursing mother tenderly caring for her children (1 Thess 2:11).

In the letters Paul's main concern is always pastoral. In offering advice to these early Christian communities Paul uses theological arguments and examples to reinforce his advice but his theology is ad hoc and practical, worked out in the day to day as he tried to respond to situations and circumstances in the various communities he had visited. Of all his letters, Romans is the closest Paul comes to giving a comprehensive statement of his understanding of God and what Jesus means for the believer and the world.

### *Reading Paul today*

When we read Paul's letters today we must always remember that the letters offer us just one part of an ongoing two-way conversation between Paul and the community. Paul is dealing with issues and answering questions that are not visible to us and it would certainly be much easier to understand what Paul is saying if we knew what the original situation or issue was. Equally, because these letters were written over a period of some twelve to fifteen years, it is only natural to expect that Paul's thoughts on certain topic may develop and change from one letter to another.

We must be careful therefore not to ask more of Paul's letters than they can offer. Some people look to Paul for ready made answers to modern questions and problems but surely this is unfair. What Paul does offer however is an exceptional example of how to bring our understanding of the Christian gospel to bear on challenges and questions that arise. His unique and invaluable insights into what Christ means for the life of the believer and the Church open new windows through which we are invited even now to see and understand our faith more fully.

### *The order of Paul's letters in the Bible.*

The order in which we find Paul's letters arranged in the Christian Bible has nothing to do with the order in which they were written. Those addressed to communities are placed first and arranged in order of length. Accordingly Roman appears first. Letters addressed to individuals are placed second, again in order of length and therefore Philemon appears last.

While scholars debate the exact order in which the letters were actually written it is generally accepted that 1 Thessalonians was the first written (c. 50 CE) and is thus the oldest Christian writing in existence. 1 and 2 Corinthians are usually placed in the mid-50's CE while the more theological letters, such Romans and Philippians are dated close to 60CE.

## *Paul and the Role of Women*

In modern times Paul's teaching on the role of women has given rise to much debate and controversy. On the one hand Paul appears to welcome the full participation of women in the work of ministry. In Romans 16, for example, Paul seems to take the presence of women in leadership positions in the early Church for granted and commends or greets several by name, including: Phoebe, a leading figure in the church at Cenchrae; Prisca and Junia, whom he describes as missionary partners; Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa, all of whom are described as workers for the Lord. Similarly in Phillipians 4:2-4 two women, Euodia and Syntyche, are described as 'co-workers' with Paul in spreading the gospel. Equally, in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, Paul speaks of the role of both men and women in praying and prophesizing in liturgical gatherings. From these texts it certainly seems that Paul genuinely sought to live out the vision of equality he articulated in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

On the other hand we also find texts in Paul that seem to justify a subordinate role for women in worship and in marriage. Elsewhere in the first letter to the Corinthians, for example, we find an instruction that women should be silent at meetings (1 Corinthians 14:34-35) while the first letter to Timothy seeks to use the story of Adam and Eve to justify a lesser role for women (1 Timothy 2:12-15). Other texts that deal with the relationship of husband and wife seem to sanction a subordinate role for wives (Colossians 3:18, Titus 2:4-5). What then are we to make of the claim that Paul justifies the subordination of women?

Two considerations are important. Firstly, if we accept the scholarly consensus that Colossians,

Timothy and Titus were not in fact written by Paul himself, then these later texts should be interpreted not as reflecting Paul's own attitude but rather should be viewed as evidence of the gradual assertion of male dominance and the gradual marginalization of women as the early Church developed in what was a profoundly patriarchal culture and society at that time. Secondly, even where Paul himself seems to favour a lesser role for women, we must remember that we do not know what particular circumstance motivated the apostle to respond in the way he did. We have no way of knowing whether Paul's advice was meant for a particular local circumstance or whether it reflected a more general attitude.

Finally, it needs to be remembered, especially when these passages are used in the liturgy, that these texts come from particular social and religious settings in which male dominance was taken for granted. These passages must be read in the context of the whole of Scripture, particularly in the light of Jesus' own inclusive attitude and behaviour that shines forth in the gospels.

Fr Sean O' Sullivan

Cork & Ross Office of Adult Religious Education