

Knowing St Paul...His Background, Writings, and Teachings

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2008 is the Year of St Paul!

Pope Benedict XVI has declared the year 2008-2009 the "YEAR of St Paul" in honour of the Apostle to mark two thousand years since St Paul's BIRTH. The anniversary strictly speaking begins on June 28th 2008 and will last till June 29th 2009. Most of Christian pilgrims are expected to visit Tarsus, in Turkey (Paul's birth place) and Rome, where the Apostle has received Martyrdom!

Paul, originally Saul, from the Tribe of Benjamin, was born in Tarsus (southern Turkey). He changed his name to Paul after he has converted Sergius Paulus. He was very proud to have been one of the students of Gamaliel, a very well known and respected Rabbi (Acts 22.3) By birth a Jew, by grace a Roman Citizen (from birth through Roman Citizens parents), by culture also a Greek. He was a genius with three civilizations, free to operate among Jews, Romans, and Greek cultures.

The first time we encounter Saul (Paul) is as a witness and a partaker in the stoning and death of St Stephen, the first Christian Martyr. In Acts 7.58 we get the information that Saul, being very young to stone Stephen, guarded the clothes of the executioners of Stephen. As Saul began to grow, both in years and zeal in persecuting the Christians, he arrested many of them Acts 8.3, and Acts 9. Many are those who think that Chapter 9 of Acts describes the conversion of Saul; BUT in reality this CHAPTER describes the mission of this GREAT APOSTLE. In Acts 9.15-16 we have a very clear and unquestionable description of the Mission of St Paul. The Lord Jesus said to Annias: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him (Saul-Paul) how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." These words describe in detail the mission of St Paul, not only as the Apostle to the Gentiles, but also as a true witness of God's love to the sons of Israel!!!

Before we leave behind us Acts 9, it is interesting to notice how Luke, the author of The Acts of the Apostles (often also called the Acts of the Holy Spirit on account of the many interventions of the Holy Spirit in the life of the First Christians) places in front of us a clear picture of what the future of Paul will look like: *“Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.”* (Ac 9.22)

In the same chapter (Ac 9) we are confronted with the testimony of Barnabas about Paul in front of the Apostles in Jerusalem: *“in Damascus he (Saul) had **spoken boldly** in the name of Jesus... in Jerusalem **speaking boldly** in the name of the Lord.”* (Ac 9.27-28)

Because Paul spoke boldly in his preaching, the Hellenists were determined to kill him! When a person has the courage to speak the truth, he is bound to undergo persecution. As a matter of fact, later on, Paul writing to Timothy would tell him: *“All those who desire to live a godly life, they are bound to suffer persecution.”*

Chapter 13 of Acts is the third information that we have about Paul and his missions and teachings, not to mention the incredible persecutions that he will have to endure on account of the Gospel! In this particular chapter, it is clearly stated that through the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Saul (Paul) were set aside for **“Special Missions”**. From here on – Ac 13 – we will be facing a barrage of information about the life of Paul, his Missions, and his teachings and witness of the Gospel.

First Mission: (Missionaries: Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas)

The first Missionary is covered by Acts 13.4 -14.28, in detail and a work of art. It is no wonder that many times Luke is portrait as a Painter! Among other things to be noticed in Ac 13 is the change of name of Saul to Paul in Ac 13.9: *“But Saul, also known as Paul...”* This happens after the conversion of the proconsul Sergius Paulus, and this is the cause why some biblical scholars think that because of Sergius Paulus that Saul adopted the name Paul. This is highly questionable.

The First Missionary Journey: From Jerusalem the Missionaries moved to Seleucia and from Seleucia they sailed to Cyprus. Their evangelization in Cyprus took place mainly in Salamis and Paphos. In Acts 13.6 we are told that here, at Paphos, Paul and his companions met with great opposition from a certain magician Bar Jesus (also called Elymas). The language of Paul is something to be recorded, not to mention, his miracle which blinded this magician! This miracle convinced the proconsul Sergius Paulus of the genuineness of Paul's teaching (Ac 13.12).

From the information that we get from this chapter (Ac 13) one can easily be misled to think that Paul was not an easy fellow to live with. BUT this is far from the truth! Paul was a man of principles who was more than ready to bend backwards to help others; however, whenever he encountered nonsense, he was never ready to take it. The next stop after Paphos was Perga in Pamphylia. Paul's decision to sail to Antioch of Pisidia was not acceptable by John (Mark). This behaviour of John (Mark) was in Paul's judgement not acceptable, and so, Paul sticking to his guns, made John (Mark) leave Paul and Barnabas and return to Jerusalem. This action of John (Mark) later on will be the cause of a drift between Paul and Barnabas.

Arriving in Antioch Paul and Barnabas, did not loose time... they went to the synagogue, and as soon as the opportunity gave them a chance, they proclaimed the word of the Good News in the synagogue. First official preaching of Paul: *"Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak..."* (Ac 13.16) An interesting observation is the fact that Paul in his preaching and defence of the Good News, most of the times he gives the background of the Jewish history, showing how God has planned these events and that HE was always the One to control them! This is what is called "the history of Salvation" or even better: **Salvation in History!** Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it is indeed a great consolation to never loose sight of the fact that GOD IS INDEED IN CONTROL!

The preaching and teaching of Paul is very impressive, not only in his letters, but also in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul's preaching (and Barnabas) in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia left a very good impression on the hearers, and they wanted to hear more: "As

*Paul and Barnabas were going out, **the people urged them to speak about these things again the next Sabbath.***”(Ac 13.42)

From his very first proclamation of the Kerygma, Paul did not hesitate to make it clear to his listeners that true freedom can only come to us through Jesus Christ: *“Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man (Jesus) forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”*(Ac 13.38-39)

The advance and success of Paul’s preaching was by no means an easy one; the price of persecution was attached to it. When the following Sabbath the Jews saw how “almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord” from Paul and Barnabas, the Jews were filled with jealousy and blasphemy! (Ac 13.44) This jealousy and rejection became the very spring board from which from here on Paul was to abandon his Mission to the Jews and began his mission as THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES: *“Since you rejected it and judged yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life we are now turning to the Gentiles.”* (Ac 13.46b) Indeed, action and reaction are equal and opposite. This principle does not only apply in Physics, but also here. Notice the reaction of the Gentiles in front of this action of the Jews: *“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers.”* (Ac 13.48)

The mission must continue, even though with all this persecution! Here for the first time we see Paul shaking off the dust from his sandals as a sign of rejection of God’s grace by the hearers... it is such a horrifying gesture: *“So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium”.* (Ac 13.52)

God is powerful, and even out of the persecutions He can draw positive things: the spreading of the Word to other countries, and also the experience of JOY even in the midst of persecution. Chapter 13 of Acts comes to a close with a very precious statement: *“And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”* (Ac 13.52)

The experience that our missionaries (Paul & Barnabas) had in Antioch is repeated with even more depth in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. So great was the impression that Paul and Barnabas have left on the people of Lystra, that both of them were given divine titles. Paul was given the title: Hermes (because he was the main speaker) and Barnabas was called Zeus! The people, including the priests, brought out oxen and garlands to worship them. The reaction and words of Paul and Barnabas in front of all this are worth noticing (Ac 14.13-17). Many are those who quite often by pass the importance of what has happened here in Lystra. Paul's words and his message ought to leave its imprint upon all of us:

“We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” (Ac 14.13-17)

While we are dealing with this chapter (Ac 14) I want to draw your attention to these two things:

First: The study and interpretation of the Bible is called by the term: **Hermeneutics**, a word that is derived from Hermes (cfr Ac14.12) who in Greek mythology was the god that interpreted the message of the gods to the level of the people, using a language and terminology which the ordinary person can understand. That is why in Ac 14.12 Paul was called Hermes! The people understood clearly his message. Do we understand his message: **THAT GOD IS THE ONE WHO FILLS OUR HEARTS WITH JOY?**

Second: The cause of all this commotion in Ac 14 was the result of just one person - who was crippled- who took time to listen **“intently”** to the preaching of Paul. Later on Paul will tell us explicitly that ‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of God’. The intent listening produced the right disposition to receive the healing power of God's

Word: "Paul, looking at him intently (we listen to God's Word, God listens to ours, ALWAYS) and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said in a loud voice, "*Stand up-right on your feet.*" *And the man sprang up and began to walk.*" (Ac 14.8-10) We too like this person, starting from myself, we are crippled from birth because of original sin, BUT God's word has the power to heal us and to wash away our sins: "*You are clean because of the words that I told you!*" (John 15.3). Our healing depends upon listening to God's Word.

"It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God". (Ac 14.22b)

The above statement that Paul and Barnabas have left as a reminder to all the Churches which they had founded, is by no means an empty sentence. Later on Paul was to repeat and live this reality many times, even to the extent of writing to the Galatians: "*From now on, let no one make trouble for me, for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.*" (Gal 6.17). Among the last words that Paul placed in front of his great disciple Timothy, he admonished him: "*As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*" (2 Tim 4.5) Earlier, in the same letter Paul bluntly said to Timothy: "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.*" (2 Tim 2.15)

However, in speaking about the persecutions and the sufferings that Paul himself had to endure as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, no other text in his writings gives us a better description of his sufferings than 2 Corinthians 11.23-33. Because many are those who take lightly the above statement, it does help that we read and re-read the words of Paul in the just quoted reference:

"Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman - I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger

from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak ? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus knows that I do not lie. In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.”

Leaving behind us Acts 14, it is a must that one should read the information that we have in Galatians 2 to have a clear picture of what is the background of Acts 15, the so called “The First Council”, **The Council in Jerusalem!**

Since his conversion to Christianity, Paul has been literally haunted by the sect of the Pharisees (Ac 15.5). Among the certain individuals who came from Judea to Antioch to create trouble – Ac 15.1, we encounter these Pharisees, who though they were believers, were insisting that for salvation it was necessary to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses! From the outset Paul insisted that neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision counts... what counts is a NEW CREATION. A creation that can come through listening to God’s Word: Jesus Christ.

There is no doubt about it that Paul’s experience from the time of his conversion, and also during his time in Arabia, has taught him the undeniable importance of learning the message of God’s love manifested on the Cross. It is not a surprise to hear him constantly boasting about the Cross of Our lord Jesus Christ. Writing to the Galatians he insists: *“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Listen! I Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law....”* (Gal 5.1-6)

It can rightly be said that the entire letter to the Galatians helps us to understand the importance of the Council in Jerusalem and its consequences thereafter!

God willing, next week we will be reflecting on the Council in Jerusalem and its repercussions; but in order to prepare us to get into the spirit let us keep in front of us what Paul had to say towards the end of his letter to the Galatians: *“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; BUT A NEW CREATION IS EVERYTHING!”* (Gal 6.14 – 15)

The Council in Jerusalem:

This meeting, also called “the Apostolic Council”, is not only the first meeting of the early elders of the Church to discuss the implications of preaching a gospel of Grace among the Gentiles; but it is also the watershed in the Book of the Acts. The reader of Acts will notice that up till chapter 15, Luke was interested in what all the apostles were doing, especially Peter; but with this chapter Paul takes the central stage, the narratives become centered on Paul’s activities, and the shift from Jerusalem to Ephesus, and later to Rome is note worthy.

Even though Paul himself was a Pharisee before his conversion, Luke does not hesitate to demonstrate his opposition to this sect. As a matter of fact, Luke never portrays the Pharisees in positive terms (Luke 5.17,21,30,33; 6.2,7; 7.30,36,37,39; 11.37-39, 42-43,53; 12.1; 13.31; 14.1,3; 15.2; 16.14; 17.20; 18.10-11; 19.39)

Acts mentions five visits of Paul to Jerusalem (Ac 9.26-30; 11.27-30 and 12.25; 15.1-30 (for the Council); 18.22; 21.17-23.31) Though In Ac 15, the Council in Jerusalem is presented as a reaction to the dispute in Antioch (15.1-4; Gal 2.1-10), however, to limit the Council only to this it will minimize the importance of it. Acts 11.1-18; 11.27-30; 12.25; and 18.22; ought to be taken into consideration in the interpretation of Ac 15.1-30. Later on when James meets Paul in Ac 21.18-25, he reminds Paul of the terms and the

decisions taken in this Council in Jerusalem.

Here we are faced with two trends: on one side we have the law of Moses and the Jewish customs; on the other side we are enriched with the Gospel of GRACE that Paul was preaching, a Gospel that the author of the Gospel of John was to present us in clear and undeniable terms: *“The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1.17)*. NO BODY, more than Paul, makes clear to us the importance and truthfulness of the statement which is stated in John 1.16: *“From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace”*.

The importance of **the Gospel of grace**, of which Paul is without doubt the great promoter, cannot be over emphasised. It is not so much a matter of circumcision, Moses, Law, and Jewish customs; but a New Creation brought to us by Jesus Christ, *“by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not your own doing” (Ephesians 2.8)*

The Irony of the Council

Chapter 15 of Acts portrays the result of a great dispute that took place in Antioch as a reaction to Paul's teaching: "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus". It is strange how he is not among the two main speakers in the Council. Peter's speech (Ac 15.5-11) and the speech of James (Ac 15.13-21) dominate the whole scenery and their speeches compliment each other!

The first speech by Peter gives us the background of how God has been active through the conversions of Gentiles and '**God fearing people**', prepared the ground for this new teaching in the New Testament. This teaching was expounded on by Paul (or one of his disciples) at a later time in the Letter to the Ephesians chapter 1. The fact that Peter is the one who gave this exposition illustrates that he shares in the office of Paul: "**Apostle to the Gentiles**".

The second speech delivered by James, based on the Scriptures, presents a compromise: NO demand that gentiles be circumcised, BUT they are to observe the "apostolic decree" which Paul and Barnabas were delegated to bring to the Gentiles. Together with Paul and Barnabas, the Council also delegated Judas, also called Barsabbas and Silas to deliver the famous letter: Ac15.23-29.

The irony of the results of the Council is that, on one hand, it brought unity to the Church, it also brought dissention between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them; whereas, Paul absolutely denied this request, and so they separated. Paul took with him Silas and set out to Syria and Cilicia. Barnabas took his cousin John Mark, and together they set sail to Cyprus.

From chapter 15 of Acts, one can already begin to sense the zeal, and dedication of the Apostle Paul to live the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ without compromise. This ought to be also the challenge of every believer in Christ. It is no wonder that Paul later on in his letters will encourage his hearers to "**Imitate me as I imitate Christ**". May we listen

to his words!

Learning to be flexible to God's directions

The book of *The Acts of the Apostles* is also known with the title: *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*; and chapter 16 of Acts does a good job in convincing us that indeed, this Book merits this title.

Every Christian is a “missionary” by virtue of his/her baptism. Paul’s missionary zeal is manifested clearly in his life and in the letters he wrote to the Christians. Acts 15.36-18.22 speaks about the so-called **Second Missionary Journey** of Paul. After a little argument that occurred between Paul and Barnabas (c.f. Ac 15.36-40), they went separate ways. Barnabas went with Mark, while Paul chose Silas as his new missionary. Passing through Syria and Cilicia, they went to Derbe and Lystra. It was here, in Lystra, that Paul met Timothy, a well-spoken disciple (c.f. Ac 16.2), and Paul invited him to join them in their mission.

The encounter with Timothy regarding his circumcision is one of the great signs of Paul’s wisdom and flexibility. Though Paul was one of those who insisted that circumcision was not a **sine qua non** necessity for salvation, none the less, he had Timothy circumcised because of the Jews present (Ac 16.3). The following verses in chapter 16 convey to us the powerful message of **learning to be flexible to the directions of the Holy Spirit!** The expressions that Luke uses in his description of these events are interesting: *“Having gone through Phrygia and Galatia, **having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia...** they attempted to go into Bithynia, **but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.**”* (Ac 16.6 – 8)

Passing through from one place to another, Paul, Silas and Timothy arrived at Troas. Here, most probably, they met Luke. From here henceforth, Luke in his narration of the events, begins to make use of the pronoun **“we”**, thereby including himself in the narrative. This indeed is an interesting and important observation. After **another**

intervention of the Spirit, through a vision, in verse 10 of chapter 16, Luke writes: *“When he (Paul) had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia...”*

The experience that Paul (Saul) had on the road to Damascus was indeed an eye-opener for him: **He learned how to be flexible to the direction of the Spirit**. We too, like Paul, and any true disciple of Jesus, ought to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us and to teach us how to bend in parallel to God’s Will.

The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul

The importance of this topic can never be over emphasized, and rightly so. Many are those books that have been written on this topic, and most of them profess the vastness and “inaccuracy” of dealing with this all encompassing subject.

One cannot overlook the fact that, from the beginning of his ministry, Paul was very conscious of the role and necessity of the Spirit of God in his preaching and mission: to be an Apostle to the Gentiles: **Acts 9.15-16**.

The word “**pneuma**” (spirit) occurs 145 times in the Pauline letters. The majority of these occurrences unambiguously refer to the Holy Spirit; although one has to admit that the full term **Holy Spirit** occurs only 17 times. In Paul’s letters, we also encounter the expression: “the Spirit of God” (His Spirit) 16 times; and “Spirit of Christ” (or its equivalent) 3 times (c.f. Romans 8.9: **the Spirit of Christ**; Galatians 4.6: **the Spirit of his Son**; and Philippians 1.19: **the Spirit of Jesus Christ**).

Here are a few references that will wet our appetite to have a good taste of the importance of role of the Holy Spirit in our lives:

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3.17)

“The Holy Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1.13-14)

“Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” (2 Timothy 1.14)

“This Spirit he has poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour” (Titus 3.6-7)

Indeed, the prophecy of the prophet Zechariah, is clearly explained in Paul’s teaching about the SPIRIT: *“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit”* says the Lord (Zech 4.6)

“THE SPIRIT HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS .” (Romans 8.26)

Paul ,the Roman Citizen

Chapter 16 of Acts covers many events, including the famous comment of Luke: *“...from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia **and a Roman colony.**”* (Ac 16.12) It is from this expression: *“**and a Roman colony**”* that we uncover another side of Paul and his activities. Rarely do we come across the fact that Paul was a Roman Citizen. In Acts 22.6f, Paul described himself: *“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city (Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today”*. The Jewish origin of Paul is obvious, but his Roman background, though mentioned only a few times, is of great importance.

In Acts 16, Paul travels to Europe. At this point, the preaching of the **Kerygma**, the message of Salvation, needed to reach beyond the context of its Jewish roots. Here is a classic example of Grace working with nature. In chapter 16, we see how Paul, after being arrested, made use of his Roman Citizenship to gain confidence and freedom in travelling, especially in Europe.

As a Roman citizen, Paul possessed, among other things, three rights: **Ius Honorum**, **Ius Suffragi**, and **Ius Provocandi**. That is: the right not to be beaten or imprisoned

before a fair hearing in court, the right to vote for the election of the Emperor, and the right to appeal to Caesar if he felt he was treated unjustly by the prosecutors. We know from Acts that Paul has used two of these three rights. In Acts 16.37-39, we encounter, for the first time, the exercise of Paul's rights as a Roman Citizen. He knew when and how to use his rights in favour of the proclamation of the Gospel. However, one must not be misled in thinking that Paul would be protected from persecution. His words to Timothy are without doubt a constant reminder to every Christian that is determined to live a godly life: *"Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* (2 Timothy 3.12).

The words and advice that Paul gives to Timothy, his most beloved disciple, are also addressed to us: *"As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully"*. (2 Timothy 4.5)

Arguing...Explaining... Proving... Proclaiming ! (Acts 17)

Having left Lydia's home (Ac 16.40), Paul and Silas, passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians makes an interesting comment on his stay with the Thessalonians. The first few verses of Acts 17 speak about how Paul and Silas argued, explained, proved, and **proclaimed** in the Synagogue that Jesus was The Messiah.

From 1 Thessalonians 1.5-2.16, we have a detailed account of the success that Paul and Silas had in Thessalonica: *"Because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction..."* (1 Thess 1.5) The terminology that Paul uses in this letter is full of affection, pain, and conviction! Just a few examples will illustrate this point: *"we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."* (1 Thess 2.7b-8) There is no doubt that Paul's humanity and tenderness is something that one cannot overlook in his letters:

“As you know we dealt with each of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” (1 Thess 2.11-12)

The reception of God’s Word in Thessalonica is expressed in clear language in 1 Thessalonians 2.13: *“We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.”*

Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica was by no means free of persecutions. Persecution was such that the believers had to send Paul and Silas off to Beroea (Ac 17.10). Luke’s comment about the proclamation in Beroea is very encouraging: *“These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.”* (Ac 17.11-12)

This message rings true for us as well: the more we examine the Scriptures, the more we come to know Our God!!!

“Paul was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (Ac17.16)

While Paul was in Athens awaiting the arrival of Silas and Timothy, he noticed that Athens was full of idols. Does this sound familiar? Are we not also surrounded with many different idols, some inherited, and others we have created ourselves? When we come across such expressions in the Scriptures, they make us think. We are surprised to discover another St. Paul who is more than ready to tell us what we ought to do to free ourselves from this enslavement.

The famous speech of Paul in front of the Areopagus (Mars Hill) is relevant today as

much as it was two thousand years ago. In his observation, he noticed that the Athenians were building altars left, right, and center. Among all the things that caught Paul's attention was the inscription on one of the altars which left a great impression on him: **"To an unknown god"** (Ac17.23). Nowadays, we do need another Paul who can help us discover and learn more about this god whom we, like the Athenians, worship without knowing much about him. We continue to build one altar after another: sport, work, money, family, health and so on. When it comes to building an altar "to an unknown god" we are not hesitant to do so, BUT, there are not so many who really make time to WORSHIP this unknown god who has manifested HIMSELF to us in Christ Jesus!

The more we listen to the kerygma (proclamation) preached by THE APOSTLE, the more we dispel our ignorance and get to know and see this God who loves us to the extent of giving up His only Son for our Freedom. This God that Paul announces is *"not far from each one of us. For In him we live and move and have our being..."* (Ac 17.27b-28) Perhaps we too are called like Paul to *"look carefully at the objects of your (our) worship."* The collapse and the crisis of the financial system in the States and elsewhere is a wake-up call revealing to us where our treasures lie. I have never seen people captured so much by anxiety. People miss Sunday Worship, but do they panic about it?

May we take this opportunity to set our priorities straight, and place our TRUST in this God who wants us to know him... after all HE IS OUR FATHER!

Paul was occupied with proclaiming the Word (Acts 18.5)

The next stop on Paul's journey from Athens was Corinth. Corinth is famous in Christianity because of the letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians later on in his life. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, they found Paul **occupied** with the proclamation. Once more Luke shows his mastery of depicting the events and behaviour of peoples -- "occupied" -- what a verb to use!

What are the things that keep us occupied today? To be occupied with the Word is not a joke. **How many people forget that, to be out of step with the Lord, you cannot win; but, to be in step with Him, you cannot lose!** The opposition that Paul encountered in Corinth, especially from the Jews, pushed him to the limit. It was here in Corinth that we hear Paul saying: *"From now on I will go to the Gentiles"*. (Ac 18.6) They had lost a great opportunity. As the saying goes, you can bring the horse to the water, but you cannot make it drink.

As we stand at the threshold of the Synod of the Bishops in Rome, discussing and studying God's Word, let us recall the words that His Holiness Benedict XVI said to the Youth in his message for the World Youth Day, 2006: *"You are urged to become familiar with the Bible, and to have it at hand so that it can be your compass pointing out the road to follow."* These words are not addressed only to the youth. Knowing that God's Word is indeed our compass, we follow the direction we find in its instruction. Like the Corinthians, who, for eighteen months listened to Paul's preaching and were converted; we too, as soon as we open our hearts to hear God's message, we can hear the Lord saying to us: *"Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you."* (Ac 18.9-10).

When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18.12)

The brother of the famous philosopher Seneca, L. Junius Gallio, was proconsul of Achaia in the year A.D. 51. This is one of the few reliable dates in the chronology of St Paul.

Luke commented on Gallio's attitude regarding the accusations against Paul: *"But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things."*(Ac 18.17)

As Paul stands at the end of his second missionary journey, and at the threshold of the third, the Lord encouraged him with these words in a vision: **"Do not be afraid"** (Ac 18.9). Perhaps we tend to forget that each one of us, like Paul, is entrusted with a **mission**, and what the Lord said to Paul, He also says to each of us: **"Do not be**

afraid.” If we are open to the Lord’s encouragement, when we encounter obstacles, like Paul, we will persevere and even be ready for the next mission!

From Corinth, Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla travelled to Syria, and landed in Ephesus. He left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus. Here, Paul began his third missionary journey in around April in the year 52. Leaving Ephesus, he travelled to Caesarea, and came to Jerusalem. After that, he went on to Antioch and Galatia and Phrygia.

In Paul’s absence, Priscilla and Aquila continued to evangelize in Ephesus, coming across the famous Apollos. Later on, Paul will cross paths with Apollos in Corinth. As we can see from Acts 18 and 1 Corinthians 3.4-9, Apollos had a certain charisma to attract people and was eloquent in speaking about the Scriptures. It seems that for a while, Apollos was heading towards a risk of creating a division in the church of Corinth. Paul’s genius is revealed in the way he dealt with the problem of partisanship -- a classical solution to a very serious problem. It does help all of us to remember Paul’s reaction in front of such a problem: *“Think of us this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.”* (1 Cor 4.1) YES, we are the servants of Christ, and also stewards of God’s mysteries; let us live as such!

Embarking on the Third Missionary Journey (Acts 19,20,21)

There is no doubt that during his first and second missions, Paul and his companions experienced some strange and difficult moments; but nothing compared to the overwhelming experiences and deeds of power of his third missionary journey. This mission took them to twenty-three places in a little over three years! Starting from Antioch (Ac 18.22-23), they traveled to Tarsus, Cilicia, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, Troas, Samothrace, Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Cenchrea, Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Syrian Antioch. Just reading this itinerary leaves one breathless! Paul did not have the ease of modern modes of travel. He traveled mainly by horse, camel, or ship. Travel in those days was difficult and dangerous, spanning many sleepless nights. Paul gives an

account in his letter to the Corinthians: 2 Corinthians 11.22-12.13. This is one of those sections of Paul's letters that brings tears to our eyes.

2 Cor 11.22ff provides us with an understanding the answer Paul received for his prayer in 2 Cor 12. This famous statement is a great consolation to each one of us: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor 12.9)

Paul's laying of hands on about twelve persons who were baptized "into John's baptism" is worth noticing because of its effect: *"When Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied ..."* (Ac 19.6-7) . During his stay in Ephesus, we are told that for three months, Paul would go to the synagogue where he *"spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord."* (Ac 19.8-10).

The BOLDNESS and ZEAL of Paul to preach the Word of God, is something that awakens in us the urge to imitate him. This is particularly true in light of the Bishops' addresses during the Synod of the Bishops in Rome on the Word of God. Yes, dear Brothers and Sisters, we are called to bear witness to the Word of God with BOLDNESS. First and foremost, we are to become more familiar with this WORD and allow it to take root in us and grow to bear witness through our actions. **Let us not forget, "that His power is made perfect in weakness."** (2 Cor 12.9)

"The Word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed." (Acts 19.20)

Paul's stay in Ephesus, which lasted about two years, was by no means devoid of powerful experiences. Consider the language and terminology that Luke uses and you will find a glimpse of the presence of God in Paul's mission. The great number of tourists and visitors to the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus is by itself a proof of the great obstacle

that Paul and his companions had to conquer in order to proclaim the Gospel of Christ the Lord.

The hand of God Acts 19 is clearly manifested not only in the expression: “*God did **extraordinary** miracles through Paul...*” (Ac 19.11); but above all in the description that Luke used in describing the reaction of both Jews and Greeks: “*When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, **everyone was awestruck**; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised.*” (Ac 19.17) ‘Awe’, ‘amazement’, ‘dumbfounded’, and ‘astounded’ are all reactions of the human person when confronted with the divine presence! This presence is felt most clearly when we encounter obstacles and persecutions. Paul, later on, writing to Timothy will exhort him in these words: “*Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my **persecutions** and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. **What persecutions** I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted.***” (2 Tim 3.10-12).

Instinctively, we often try to get through persecutions quickly, without considering the possible value they may have in our lives! In Acts 19.23, Luke tells us: “*About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way*”. This happened in Ephesus, in the place where Paul told us that: “*I fought with wild animals at Ephesus*” (1 Cor 15.32). This suffering must have left a great impression on Paul, because he mentions it again in his second letter to the Corinthians 1.8-9. What we can take from these verses is a lesson to learn from and treasure: “*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.*”

Let us learn to lean more on God and trust him...He will not let us down!

Riot in Ephesus (Acts 19.23-41)

With the expertise of a master painter, Luke skillfully scribes a scene with a few strokes of his pen, as if it were unfolding before your very eyes. Such is his account of the Riot in Ephesus, in which Demetrius, a silver smith, the Shrine of Artemis, Paul and his companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, Alexander and the court act out the scene so vividly, that this is second only to the classical account of St Paul's shipwreck on the Island of Malta. (Ac 27.27-28.10)

The riot in Ephesus left a lasting impact on Paul and his companions, despite the three years they had spent with their community. On their way back to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, they did not dare stop in Ephesus, but stopped in Miletus instead: *"From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him."* (Ac 20.17)

Paul's farewell speech cuts the heart deeply. His service in Ephesus tested the depths of his humility and perseverance *"with tears enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews."* (Ac 20.19b) These tears in Ephesus were something common, as can be seen in Paul's own words: *"I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering **that for three years I did not cease night and day to warn everyone with tears.**"*(Ac 20.29-31).

It goes without saying that any true disciple ought to strive to take the call of Christ seriously, like Paul did in Ephesus. Paul's determination stands out as a shining example that we can treasure in our hearts: *"I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."* (Ac 21.13b)

“And now, as a captive to the Spirit...”(Ac 20.22a)

Paul's farewell speech to the elders of the church of Ephesus, delivered at Miletus (Ac 20.17-35), brought tears to their eyes: *“There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving...”* (Ac 20.37f) His words will stir our hearts to the same response.

Often in Paul's letters, we find Paul referring to himself as a **Prisoner of Jesus Christ**. In Acts 20, we hear Paul using this expression, telling us that he is **“bound in the Spirit”**. It is this Spirit that is leading him to Jerusalem: *“I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me.”* (Ac 20.22b-23) The Lord set His face towards Jerusalem with determination: *“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”* (Luke 9.51) Every follower of Christ, with determination, under the power of the Holy Spirit, is empowered to take the same journey, and, like Paul, is given the grace to be **determined to finish the course**. (cf Ac 20.24)

It becomes very clear that Paul is very aware of the power of the Holy Spirit. It only takes a few passages from his letters to convince us of this. In Romans 15.13 we read *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope”* Another example is to be found in the same chapter: *“by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit”*(Romans 15.19) Paul often uses the presence of the Spirit as synonymous to the presence of power. The following examples are but a few: 1Thess 1.5; 1 Cor 2.4; Gal 3.5; Rom 1.4; Eph 3.16; 2 Tim 1.7; Rom 15.19; 2 Thess 1.11; 1 Cor 4.20; 2 Cor 6.7; 12.9; Col 1.11; Eph 1.19; 3.7; 2 Tim 1.8.

Indeed, every Christian is called to face the challenge: *“The spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone that is born of the Spirit.”* (John 3.8)

“Falling to our knees on the beach, we prayed” (Acts 21.5b)

Chapter 21 of Acts resumes the “we” narratives which were terminated in Ac 20.15. These will stop again in Ac 21.18, and resume again in Ac 27.1.

In reading Ac 21, one can sense the urgency with which Luke is tackling the events and the journey towards Jerusalem. The tension is made apparent when Luke tells us that: **“through the Holy Spirit they warned Paul”** (Ac 21.4). Amidst this tension, both Paul and Luke know that prayer is a powerful weapon to conquer the fear that works against the determination to do God’s will.

We often hear Paul exhorting the Christians to pray without ceasing, for example: *“Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulations, be constant in prayer.”* (Rom 12.12) It is clear that Paul and Luke influenced each other on the importance of prayer in the life of the Christian. It is no surprise that Luke has gained the deserved title as the Writer on Prayer. There are numerous passages in the writings of Luke where we find Luke’s reference to prayer: Luke 1.10; 3.21; 6.12; 9.18; 9.28-29; 10.21-22; 11.1-4; 18.1-8; 22.31; 22.39-46; 24.53; Acts 1.14; 1.24; 2.47; 4.23; 6.6; 8.15; 9.11; 10.2; 10.9; 12.5; 12.12; 13.3; 16.25; 26.29

This tension that Luke experienced is clear in the scene where Paul sets off for Jerusalem: **“There we knelt down on the beach and prayed and said farewell to one another.”** (Ac 21.5b-6a) This tension heightens with the presence of a prophet named Agabus (Ac 21.11). In Luke’s mind, Paul is a model of Christ who is determined to do God’s will at all cost, even to the point of death. This is evident in Luke’s description of the journey towards Jerusalem: *“After these days, we got ready and started to go up to Jerusalem.”*(Ac 21.15) These words call to mind the same description that Luke used about Jesus Christ in chapter 9 of his Gospel: *“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”* (Lk 9.51)

By his example, Paul teaches us that all Christians, like Christ, ought to have their faces set towards Jerusalem, embracing God's will!

The Defense of Paul -- An opportunity to bear witness (Acts 22.1-22)

In Acts 21.15-36, Luke describes the tensions that unfold in Jerusalem during Paul's arrival. Paul arrived in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and met with James and the other elders. Unfortunately, James was influenced by what he was hearing about Paul, without having heard an account from Paul himself. (cf. Ac 21.21-24). It was the advice of James that set in motion the **riot in Jerusalem and the Temple**.

Josephus Flavius, a great Jewish historian who lived at the time, wrote in the *History of the Jewish Wars*, that at least 30,000 people would come from outside of Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. The Temple was surrounded with a boundary wall, and on this wall were marble slabs engraved with these words: *"If a gentile is caught inside this wall, he will be put to death immediately"*. Later on, Paul (or one of his disciples), was to refer to this experience in the Letter to the Ephesians: *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and **has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us**. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile BOTH GROUPS to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it."* (Eph 2.13-16)

The riot in the Temple was the result of a plot to kill Paul (cf. Ac 21.31), but the Roman tribune and the soldiers came to Paul's rescue. After Paul spoke with the tribune, it was made clear that Paul was not the Egyptian trouble maker! (cf. Ac 21.38) After this development, Paul was granted permission to address the crowd. In this astounding turn of events, Paul addresses his persecutors in the same way that Stephen did: **"Brothers and fathers listen to me"** (cf. Ac 7.2 and Ac 22.1)

“Being zealous for God, just as all of you are today” (Acts 22.3b)

The defense of Paul before the crowd, the tribune, and the soldiers, provides another opportunity for Luke to present to us a clear picture of the man who stands under such scrutiny! In Acts alone, there are three places where Luke expounds on the zeal and determination of Paul to serve God without reservation. (cf. Acts 9.1-25; Ac 22.4-16; 26.9-18)

In many ways, Paul’s mission was unique. In the Scriptures, it is common to see that **God does not call the equipped, but that He equips those who are called.** In our scrutiny concerning Paul, his background, writings and teachings, we are bound to discover that the person under scrutiny is very equipped for the mission. He impressed those he spoke to by addressing them in Hebrew. Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. He was brought up in this city (Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel. He was “*a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people.*” (Ac 5.33-34) He was educated strictly (cf. Ac 26.5) according to their ancestral law, and was full of zeal for God (cf. Ac 22.3b; Gal 1.14; Rom 10.2). This evidence leads us to believe that Paul was being prepared for this great mission to proclaim that Jesus is the promised Messiah. His Jewish, Greek, and Roman backgrounds were a source of power that helped him to walk freely and work assiduously in a world where others would have been afraid to tread. It is no wonder that later on in his letters he would courageously tell the Christians: “*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.*” (cf. Philippians 3.17)

The words which Ananias addressed to Paul can be applied to each of us. These words stand as a challenge that none of us, especially in our age, can overlook: “***The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay?***” (Ac 22.14-16a)

“Keep up your courage” (Acts 23.11)

While Paul was confined to the walls of the barracks (cf. Ac 23.10), surrounded by his enemies, “***in the night, the Lord stood near him and said, Keep up your courage!***” (Ac 23.11) Let us explore what Luke is teaching us through Paul’s experience.

First of all, the wording echoes what was said in Acts 1.8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Luke and Paul yearn to see the fulfillment of this prophecy in Paul’s lifetime. The book of Acts is a journey of faith that bears witness from Jerusalem to Rome -- from the center of the Jewish world to the center of the Gentile world. As the book of Acts plays out, Rome is mentioned more and more often. Acts 23.11 portrays Rome as a place where Paul is called to bear witness; but it is not until Acts 28 where we find the journey’s end in one verse: “***And so we came to Rome***”. (Ac. 28.14)

Through Acts 22, Luke has prepared us to understand the meaning of Ac 23.11. He mentions Paul’s Roman citizenship multiple times and makes it clear that this provides Paul with a “passport” to Rome!

The next expression that catches our attention is “***That night the Lord stood near him***”. (Ac. 23.11) When the Scriptures mention that the Lord is standing near to us, it brings great consolation even in pain and suffering. Indeed, Paul does tell us: “***I can do all things in him who strengthens me***” (*Philippians 4.13*)

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

(2 Timothy 3.12)

The life of Paul bears witness to the truth of this statement! At least three times in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke mentions that Paul's life was at great risk because he was a true witness of the Gospel. The first occasion is just after his conversion, where we read in Acts 9: *"After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket."* (Acts 9.23-25)

In Greece, Paul was under the threat of another plot to kill him. Paul had to change his route to bypass Syria and go by way of Macedonia (cf. Ac 20.2-3). In his discourse to the elders in Miletus, Paul discussed the dangers he faced: *"You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews."* (Ac 20.18a-19)

In Acts 21, Paul again was under threat. The Jews from Asia plotted to destroy Paul: *"They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar."* (Ac 21.31) The greatest threat to kill Paul was when *"In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and **bound themselves by an oath** neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul."* (Ac 23.12)

In retrospect, we see the same pattern played out in the lives of the Prophets of the Old Testament. Sirach advises any person who wants to serve the Lord to prepare themselves: *"My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing. Set your heart right and be steadfast, and do not be impetuous in time of calamity. Cling to him and do not depart, so that your last days may be prosperous. Accept whatever befalls you, and in times of humiliation be patient."* (Sirach 2.1-4) Indeed, Jesus himself has warned us: *"In the world you face persecutions. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"* (John 16.33)

“When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I came with the guard and rescued him.”
(Acts 23.27b)

Roman citizens enjoyed a special protection within the Empire, as is evident in the way Rome protected Paul from his enemies. The tribune, having heard about the plot to kill Paul, came to his rescue. He ordered two of the centurions to: *“Get ready to leave by nine o’clock tonight for Caesarea with two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and take him safely to Felix the governor.”* (Ac 23.23-24)

From the letter of Cladius Lysias to Felix, the governor, it can be concluded that God was already preparing the way for Paul to bring the Good News of Salvation to Rome and beyond! The Gospel was to be preached from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Luke went to great lengths to show us how all this took place under the divine plan, using the Roman Empire as a powerful instrument to fulfill this prophecy. Many times we too are instruments in God’s hands, through which God’s love can be communicated to others. Learning to be flexible to the direction of the Spirit, is one of the more difficult lessons to learn.

Chapter 24 of Acts starts on a note of flattery by the attorney who was defending the Jews against Paul. Among the titles that Tertullus, the attorney, gives to Paul, we find the title of **“ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes”**. The rhetoric of Tertullus is counter-balanced by Paul’s speech! It is worth noting that Luke refers to Felix as being **“well informed about the Way”**. Are we well informed about the Way? If we are, do we allow this knowledge to show itself in and through our actions? If we do, let us strive to persevere and grow in living the Way so that the Good News will continue to be proclaimed especially where there is enslavement. Paul’s words to the Philippians are worth treasuring: **“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...”** (Philippians 2.12-16).

"It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today." (Acts 24.21b)

Every Christian, like Paul, can agree that to live the Christian life is to be on trial every day! The Paschal Mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ is at the core of the **kerygma** (proclamation of the Gospel). The Passion, death, and resurrection are the tripod which upholds the preaching of the Good News.

In chapter nine of Acts we were told that Paul's mission was *"to bring my name before Gentiles, and kings and the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."* (Ac 9.15b-16) In Acts 24, we see Paul defending the truth of God's love in front of Gentiles and Jews alike. In his defense, Paul was unknowingly living out his mission before the tribune. The tribune was comprised of Claudius Lysias, the governor Felix and his Jewish wife Drusilla, Porcius Festus, King Agrippa and his wife Bernice, and "the prominent men of the city". (Ac 25.23) Constantly facing the sentence of death, and experiencing resurrection, it can rightly be said that later on he acquired the consciousness of this mission: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death; if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."* (Phil 3.10-11)

Paul's defense in front of King Agrippa and the Jews is something to be studied and admired. His zeal to serve, dedication, and determination are powerful lessons that every Christian ought to uphold. So convinced was he of what he was doing, that later on he could rightly say: ***"In front of the law I was blameless"***! Luke, once more uses this defense to usher the third narration of Paul's profound experience on the road to Damascus.

The impression that Paul left on those hearing his defense can be measured by the response that Festus exclaimed: *"Paul, you are out of your mind ! Too much learning is driving you insane!"* (Ac 26.24)

Paul's trial symbolizes death, BUT, we will be doing great injustice if we do not point out the symbolism of the resurrection present at the conclusion of the trial: "...and as they were leaving, they said to one another, *"This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."* Agrippa said to Festus, ***This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.*** With Paul's appeal to the Emperor Caesar, an important step forward is accomplished in Paul's testimony: *"Then Festus, after he had conferred with his council, replied, "You have appealed to the emperor, to the emperor you will go."* (Ac 25.12)

"I appeal to the emperor." (Acts 25.11c)

Paul's appeal to the emperor has opened another important phase in Paul's life and mission. Once again, grace is building upon nature, taking advantage of Paul's Roman citizenship. One of the three rights that Rome bestowed on its citizens was "**ius provocandi**" -- the right to appeal to the emperor in Rome if they felt that they are not being treated with fairness and justice. This is exactly what Paul did in front of Festus.

The journey to Rome was by no means an easy one, especially taking into consideration the shipping season. From mid-November to March, sea navigation was closed! From Acts 27.9-10 we learn that: *"Since much time had been lost and sailing was now dangerous, because even the Fast had already gone by, Paul advised them, saying: "Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."* The Fast, which is The Day of Atonement for the Jews, occurs between the end of September and beginning of October.

What is noteworthy in this journey to Rome is the fact that Paul is surrounded by prisoners, and gentiles! He is at home, and great opportunities are presented to him to evangelize and also to bear witness; as indeed he did. From the narration that Luke provides, what stands out is the great respect which Paul has gained. This is clearly expressed on both levels: divine and human. On the divine level, we read: *"Do not be*

afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.” (Ac 27.24); and on the human level: “but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan.” (Ac 27.43)

Paul was to learn, as we all have, that true freedom does not come to us from the emperor, but by holding onto the word of God. This is stated in John’s Gospel: *“Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8.31-32)*

“ They transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius.” (Acts 27.1)

With this opening scene, Luke begins the narration of the famous journey to Rome. He is eager to get his “protagonist” safe and sound to the *“end of the world”* -- the capital of the Gentile world. It is clear that the apostle was well-treated onboard (*“Julius treated Paul kindly”* –Ac 27.3); but from chapters 27-28, we learn that the journey was fraught with dangers.

It is worth noting that the dangers faced in this journey are not among those which the apostle Paul mentions to the Corinthians. 2 Corinthians was probably written around the year 55 A.D., which was prior to the start of this journey. In 2 Cor 11.16-12.13, in his defense of apostleship, Paul tells us that he was shipwrecked three times, but obviously the shipwreck on the Island of Malta is not among these three because it took place in the year 60 A.D., roughly five years later than the date 2 Corinthians was written.

Many are the lessons that Luke conveys in his narration of this journey. The details are many, the expressions are powerful, and the technical terms are not lacking. But above all these, we cannot underestimate the courage and determination of the Apostle, whose example of faith and trust and God stand out for all onboard: *“For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said to me,*

'Do not be afraid , Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.'" (Ac 27.23-24)

Paul responded with complete trust to the angel's message: *"After he has said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves."* (Ac 27.35-36) His example inspired everyone on board -- all 276 persons. (Ac.27.37) This scene must have been great to behold.

This is not the first and only time that we experience the power that one good example can have on others. In the same narration Luke also tells us about the direction that Paul gave to the centurion and to the soldiers, and how the soldiers, heeding Paul's words, cut the ropes of the boat and let it go adrift (Ac 27.32). When we strive to give a good example to others, we cannot anticipate the many benefits of the outcome. So let us make it our aim to set a good example to others, remembering the words in Acts 1.8: ***"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."***

The Conversion of St Paul

The Feast of the Conversion of St Paul (Jan 25), together with the Shipwreck of St Paul on the Island of Malta, are two of the events that any Maltese can recall being taught since childhood. The Conversion has its drama and adventure and the Shipwreck recalls the connection of Malta to the Catholic faith, as Paul was the first Evangelizer of the Maltese people. But these two events in the life of St Paul have great influence not only on the Maltese, but on every Christian who takes seriously the historical background of the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles.

In the Acts of the Apostles we have three accounts of the narrative of Paul's Conversion: Ac 9.1-22; 22.3-16; and 26.9-21. These three narratives emphasize the fact that it was during the experience of Paul (Saul) on the road to Damascus that he also

received his mandate to be an Apostle to the gentiles. In Acts 9, Luke placed far more emphasis on the importance of Paul receiving his mission as Apostle to the Gentiles than on his conversion. Luke uses the **chiasmus style**, and clearly conveys that the point of the conversion is receiving his mission to proclaim the Good News. The words which Jesus Christ addresses to Ananias are clear and precise: *"Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the **Gentiles** and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."* (Ac 9.15-16)

In reading carefully any of the three narratives of the conversion of Paul, one cannot but hear the echo of the words that Paul has written to his disciple Timothy: *"For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us."* (2 Tim 1.11-14) This admonition is addressed to each of us who are being challenged to profess our faith in front of a world which is as pagan as it was in the time of Paul. Paul will tell us that **conversion** implies more than **being knocked down from your horse** -- it implies a lifestyle, a witness for the one about whom St Paul says: *"**The life I now live is for Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me!**"* (Galatians 2.20)

(to be continued...)