

Life & Letters of Paul

Fr Bill O'Shea



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143 Edward St, Brisbane, Australia (07) 3336 9163

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I. Sources for Paul's life and work

We have more information about St Paul – his life, his work and his teaching – than we do about any other person who lived in the early years of Christianity. And our most important source of information is, of course, Paul's own letters. Of the 27 'books' that make up the New Testament, no fewer than 14 (therefore, more than half) have traditionally been attributed to Paul. From these fourteen, we can exclude the epistle to the Hebrews, which is now generally accepted as not coming from the hand of Paul. About his authorship of the other thirteen there is much disagreement among scholars. Some of the letters are thought by many to be later imitations, written in Paul's name, either to give them added authority, or to keep alive his apostolic spirit. It was a not uncommon practice in the ancient world to attribute writings to illustrious persons from the past.

All the critics would agree on Paul's authorship of what we call the four great or major letters: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans and Galatians. There is practically no dispute either about 1 Thessalonians, Philippians or the note to Philemon. The great majority of scholars accept also 2 Thessalonians and Colossians, though a more serious question mark hangs over Ephesians. It seems best to regard the Pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) as written not by Paul himself but by his disciples, but reflecting his spirit and thought. In this broader sense, they too can be called Pauline. (Note: the canonical status and authority of these letters is not in question. Whoever was the human author, they remain part of God's inspired word. Authorship and inspiration are quite separate issues.)

The letters of Paul are an invaluable source of information for our knowledge of the life of the early church. Written in the 50's and early 60's of the 1st Century CE, they are the oldest of all the New Testament writings, earlier than the written gospels. They put us into direct contact with Paul the apostle and his thought, and give us a vivid picture of his activities – his hopes and disappointments, his successes and his failures,

as well as providing us with valuable insights into the history of Christianity in its infancy years.

The letters are our primary source not only for Paul's message or theology, but for his life as well. They do not of course provide us with anything like a complete autobiography. They were largely occasioned and conditioned by particular events and situations in the local churches which he had founded, and were all written within a relatively short space of time in the latter part of his life. They leave us therefore with many gaps, when we try to reconstruct from them Paul's whole career.

These gaps can be filled to a large extent by a second most important New Testament source, the book of the Acts of the Apostles. This book is the lengthiest of all the New Testament writings and has been traditionally attributed to St. Luke, a disciple and companion of Paul for part of his missionary career. More than half of this book deals exclusively with Paul's missionary labours (from Chapter 16 on). Not surprisingly, 'Lives' of St. Paul have tended to rely more on Acts than on Paul's own letters for reconstructing his life and work, while the letters have been used as the source of his theology. But the tendency in modern scholarship is to question seriously this approach.

A certain amount of caution is called for here, since Acts was written probably at least 30 years after Paul's most important letters (c.85), at a time when conditions within the Christian community had changed a lot from those Paul knew. Many of the issues and controversies which had preoccupied Paul, as we know them from his letters, had long been solved by the time Luke wrote his 'history' of the early Church in Acts.

For example, the most important conflict in the early Church was that of relations between Jewish and Gentile Christians. But this issue, so dominant in Paul's day, was no longer a major problem when Luke wrote. (Luke himself was a

Gentile Christian.) By then the Church had spread throughout all the nations of the Roman Empire, and indeed the book of Acts ends with the picture of Paul preaching the gospel in Rome, the capital of the Empire (28:31).

It was Paul, of course, who – under God – was the one mainly responsible for bringing about the Church situation such as it was at the time Acts was written – which explains why he figures so prominently in the book.

We need to consider also the value of Acts as an historical work. Luke certainly intended to write 'history'. But ancient history is not modern history and there is quite a difference between the ways ancient and modern historians set about their task.

All history, modern as well as ancient, contains a high proportion of interpretation over and above the bare reporting of what took place, but ancient historians allowed themselves a lot more freedom. To present their material in a vivid and dramatic way they used various techniques which a modern historian would avoid as being unscientific. This was particularly true in regard to the freedom with which ancient historians made use of speeches or conversations. They would put words in the mouths of the characters in their stories, but often they intended these words serve as a commentary on the corresponding event or situation, or an interpretation of it, rather than a record of what was actually said.

This has to be taken into account when we read the speeches attributed to Paul by Luke in the course of his narrative. The speeches in Acts, which make up nearly a third of the whole book, remain a matter of debate. Especially about the speeches in the first fifteen chapters of Acts, the first half of the book, there is a wide variety of opinion about to what extent they are primitive and authentic, really reflecting the ideas of Peter and Paul to whom they are attributed, and to what extent they are compositions Luke himself, reflecting the ideas and language of the time he wrote.

Again, it is argued that there are major discrepancies between Luke's portrait of Paul's person and work, and the self portrait which emerges from Paul's letters themselves.

While there has been some exaggeration on this matter, we must admit that Luke's purpose in writing Acts and his own particular theological outlook have resulted at least in different emphases from those to be found in Paul's own writings.

For example, in Acts the title 'apostle' is reserved almost exclusively for the original twelve. Paul is given the title 'apostle' only once. Luke regards the apostolic office instituted by Jesus while on earth as being confined to the twelve men who were his companions during the ministry, and therefore, the authoritative eye-witnesses of his words and deeds.

For the Church of Luke's time, this apostolic office had come to be seen as the guarantee of legitimate Christian tradition. Paul is presented as the great missionary to the Gentiles, approved and authorised to preach the gospel by the mother church of Jerusalem. Paul, in his own letters on the other hand, proudly and strenuously asserts his claim to the title 'apostle' on the same grounds as the twelve; and the letters seem to reflect a relationship between himself and the Jerusalem church rather different from the smooth and harmonious one described in Acts – though, as I have said, this can be, and has been, exaggerated.

Thus Luke seems to play down Paul's clashes with Jewish-Christian extremists. Nor does the importance which Paul gave to the cross of Christ, so strong in his letters, come through in the speeches put on his lips by the writer of Acts. The same can be said of other key ideas in the letters of Paul which do not come to the fore at all in Acts.

But when all this has been said, it remains true that Acts is a most important source for both the history of the early Church and for the life of Paul. Doubtless Luke sometimes handles his material with great freedom as a historian of his time, embellishing it, and fitting it into his overall theme and purpose. But no portrait of Paul can be complete without the information supplied in Acts.

Surprisingly, there is not a single passage in Acts which indicates that Luke made use of Paul's

letters or even knew of their existence. No doubt from an early period the letters were circulated among churches neighbouring on the churches to which they were addressed. But, apparently, at the time Acts was written, there was still no widely distributed collection of the letters.

In the light of what has been said, it should be clear that, while Acts must not be discounted as an important source for Paul's life and work, it remains a secondary source. It would be wrong to take Acts as the main source for Paul's life and to refer to his letters simply to supplement or fill in the gaps in Luke's account. That would only distort the picture of Paul, the missionary and the theologian. It is better to begin with the letters, and use Acts as confirmation. In the course of our study of Paul's life and letters we shall see that Acts can very often be so used, without having to force the text in any way.

Paul's literary legacy to us is entirely in the form of letters. And they are real letters, written on and for a particular occasion, for particular reasons, to particular people.

It has become customary for scholars to distinguish between a 'letter' and an 'epistle'. The distinction made is that a letter is a writing which is more personal and confidential in character. Its style, tone and form are often as free, intimate and familiar as conversation. An epistle, on the other hand, is a careful literary composition, much more formal in style and content, and primarily intended for wider publication.

It is best to call all of Paul's writings 'letters'. This is so, even though they are not private letters but intended for the wider audience of Paul's churches, and intended to be read aloud at liturgical gatherings – see 1 Thessalonians 5:27. Some prefer the term 'epistle' for the letter to the Romans, which is more solemn and doctrinal, and comes closest of all his writings to the form of a theological thesis. But even Romans is a real letter, written for a particular occasion and purpose, as we shall see.

The reasons why Paul chose this literary form are obvious. He was first and foremost a man engaged in missionary work, striving to complete

an ambitious programme of evangelization, often harassed by specific problems and conflicts. It is just not possible to draw a sharp distinction between Paul's theology and his life, between theory and practice. The contents and characteristic features of Paul's theological reflection are very closely tied to his exclusive use of the letter form, and to the situations which occasioned the letters.

Paul often tended to see his letters as unsatisfactory substitutes for direct personal meetings (1Thes 2:17 ff; Rom 15:22 ff), but probably he was often able to accomplish more by his letters than by the spoken word.

At any rate, his need to resort to this form of communication happily enables us, two thousand years later, to have first-hand information about his life and work. Certainly there are obscurities and difficulties in his letters, which is inevitable, since we cannot hope after such a lapse of time to be as familiar with his thought and his language, with the individuals involved, or with the questions discussed, as were his original correspondents. Nevertheless we can be grateful for the fact that the letter form, more than any other literary form, gives us a real feeling of closeness to the persons involved and to the situations described. More than any other literary form, the letter bears the imprint of its author as a personality, and this is certainly true in Paul's case.

In a sense his letters are unique. As I have said, despite their occasional character and the fact that they bear the stamp of Paul's personality, they are more than merely private letters, and this is so with respect to their contents, the recipients, and the author himself. What really gives them their hallmark is his passionate concern for the gospel which he preached and for the churches which he founded, and his great sense of responsibility for the task entrusted to him.

And again, what sets Paul's letters apart from others is the remarkable unity which they reveal between the person and his work. Reading his letters today, we often experience the contradictory impressions of closeness to him and remoteness from him. These opposing

impressions are partly the result of our distance in time from him and them, but are due even more to the tremendous tensions and contrasts that Paul combined in his own person. When we consider briefly his career, we find ourselves at a loss in our attempts to categorise him. He had been an orthodox Pharisee, totally committed to the concept of justification and salvation by strict obedience to the Jewish Law and implacably devoted to the destruction of Christianity; yet he became the slave of Christ preaching the gospel of justification and salvation on the basis of faith.

He could speak of himself as 'one untimely born among the apostles' (1Cor 15:7) – a kind of miscarriage – but could add, 'but by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain'.

Even as regards his physical life, there is the element of mystery. More than once, he tells us that he suffered from an illness, that he was afflicted with a 'thorn in the flesh', and 'buffeted by a messenger from Satan', a suffering not removed even after much prayer (2Cor 12:7 ff). Posthumous attempts to diagnose in medical terms the precise nature of Paul's complaint proved unsuccessful.

Yet this sick, delicate man was able to bear amazing physical hardships (2Cor 11:23 ff). And in a relatively short space of time, he found it

possible to cover the whole eastern half of the Roman Empire, and to found numerous churches which endured on two continents (Asia and Europe). He made it to Rome itself and even planned to visit Spain. This is to say nothing of the intellectual height and depth of his message, which often leaves modern readers gasping in admiration at the profusion of his ideas and the complexity of his thought.

Finally, I want to emphasise again the intimate and unbreakable relationship between Paul's life – what he personally experienced and how others responded to his activity and teaching – and his gospel and theology. No account of Paul's life is possible without constant reference to his theology. Nor can there be any worthwhile study of his theology without constant reference to Paul's own experience and that of his churches. For this reason, our study of Paul will not, as is sometimes the case, consist of just a brief introductory biographical sketch as a preface to a fuller treatment of his theology. I consider it of doubtful value just to treat Paul's ideas on a theme basis – e.g. Paul's concept of sin or faith or grace or the body of Christ or whatever – synthesising relevant passages from various letters. His theology is too much bound up with his life experiences. His life history and his theological thought have to be seen and studied as a unity.

2. Paul the man conversion and call

One of the most pleasing results of the study of St. Paul in recent times has been the re-discovery of Paul the man. There is the danger of smothering the man under the weight of his theology. Paul certainly was a great theologian, but he was first and foremost a missionary and a pioneer. We have to try and see him in this light, not as a parchment saint, nor as a professor of theology.

He was a dynamic, fearless man moving restlessly around the cities of the Mediterranean, tending to raise a riot or a revival wherever he went. He worked with his own hands at a trade, to keep himself alive for his great task. He wrote not stiff epistles, but vital, powerful, emotional letters to his spiritual children in places like Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth and Galatia.

He was a man dominated by a great ambition to preach the gospel in Rome, the heart of the Empire.

He was a man of great contrasts: apparently physically weak, but immensely tough; very humble, but also completely convinced of the great role God had chosen for him; tender and affectionate, but, when stirred, stern and violent; subject to depression, yet serene in his certainty of God and of Christ.

He was a man of his time, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a converted Pharisee who was captured or 'seized' by Christ; a man who mixed with all sorts and classes of people, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free; and apparently suffered hardships and persecutions, the like of which few men have had to endure, yet never for one moment doubting the presence and power of Christ or the truth of the message he was called to proclaim.

This then was Paul, the man from Tarsus, Pharisee, Apostle to the Gentiles, first of Christian mystics, most dynamic of Christian missionaries, slave of Jesus Christ, the human instrument of God who did more than any other to set the world alight with the gospel of Christ;

the most illustrious of all the saints of the Church.

The exact date of Paul's birth is unknown, but it was certainly about the beginning of the Christian era, and probably in the first decade, that is, before 10 CE. He was born of Jewish parents living in the Diaspora (outside of Palestine), who traced their ancestry back to the tribe of Benjamin (Phil.3:5; Rom11:1). The city of Tarsus, his birth-place, (Acts 21:39; 22:3) was a Greek-speaking city.

Though insignificant today, the Tarsus of Paul's time was a flourishing Hellenistic city. Its situation close to the Mediterranean and on the road leading from Asia Minor to Syria was favourable for trade and commerce, and it was particularly renowned as a centre of Greek culture, philosophy and education. Its schools were said to surpass even those of Athens and Alexandria. Consequently, Paul's words in Acts 21:39 are no idle boast when he describes himself as 'a citizen of no mean city'.

Many of the Diaspora Jews of this period, that is, Greek-speaking Jews living outside of Palestine, had two names, one Semitic and the other Greek or Roman. Throughout his letters Paul uses his Roman name 'Paulus' (Paul) which was a well-known Roman family name. His Jewish name, Saul, was an honoured name of the tribe of Benjamin to which he belonged. Saul, the first king of Israel, came from the tribe of Benjamin. This was his more familiar name, used among members of his own faith. It has been suggested that he assumed the name Paul only at the time of his conversion, but this is not so. Both names were given to him at birth.

Also, many of the Diaspora Jews enjoyed the privilege of citizenship of their cities, and some even possessed Roman citizenship. This was true of Paul. This privilege was to play an important role in his later life (see Acts 16:37; 22:25-29; 23:27).

Paul in his letters speaks with pride of his Jewish ancestry. In 2Cor 11:22 he boasts that he

is a Hebrew, an Israelite, and a descendant of Abraham; while in Phil 3:5 he says that he was 'circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee'.

In Acts 22:3 Luke reports Paul as saying that he received his early education in Jerusalem, which would imply that his parents moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem, while he was still a child. But this leaves a difficulty in explaining his Greek culture and outlook, as revealed in his letters, and also his constant use of the Greek Bible rather than the Hebrew Bible when he quotes from the scriptures. Probably this information is part of Luke's overall purpose in Acts, namely, to associate the future missionary to the Gentiles with Jerusalem as closely and as early as possible. Paul drew much from both his Jewish background and his Hellenistic or Greek environment. Coming from a city such as Tarsus, he knew Greek well, and his letters reveal that he could write it very well. He did not by any means grow up in a Jewish ghetto, but was born into a family with the same social and civic rights as its fellow-citizens.

Because of his ancestry, education and natural gifts, the young Paul was developing along lines which would eminently equip him as a missionary to the Gentiles. He would have been well aware of the successful missionary work of the Diaspora Jews who were fairly liberal in their requirements, satisfied as they were to attract from Gentile ranks those who were known as 'God-fearers'. These were not required to undergo circumcision and thus become full 'converts', but pledged themselves to believe in one God, and to observe the basic moral commandments of the Law with a minimum of ritual observance (Sabbath, food regulations, etc...).

The stricter Orthodox Judaism of Palestine, as represented by the Pharisees, disapproved of such liberal attitudes and insisted on circumcision for all. Following a family tradition (Acts 23:6), Paul, although a Diaspora Jew, attached himself to the party of the Pharisees (Phil 3:5). In becoming a Pharisee, Paul would not have felt compelled to turn his back on his

Diaspora origins or abandon the theological ideas he brought from there, but he certainly became a passionate devotee of the Law; and it is to his Pharisaism that we must look to explain why he became such a dedicated persecutor of the Christian church.

Acts tells us that, as a young man, he did his rabbinical training in Jerusalem, the home of the Pharisaic movement, under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder (22:3). It is to this period of his life that Paul refers in Gal 1:14, describing it as a time when he advanced in Judaism beyond many of his own age among his people, and was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers.

Paul's sojourn in Jerusalem as a rabbinical disciple in the twenties and early thirties raises the question whether Paul knew Jesus. He gives no indication in his letters that he did. 2 Cor 5:16, in which he speaks of having 'once regarded Christ from a human point of view' (or 'according to the flesh') does not necessarily imply personal knowledge of Jesus. More likely, this expression describes Paul's attitude towards Jesus prior to his conversion.

His theological training in Jerusalem was combined with the learning of a trade. Acts 18:3 tells us he learned the trade of tent-making or – more likely – of making tent-cloth, for which his native province around Tarsus was renowned. He tells us himself that during his later ministry he supported himself by the work of his hands, so as not to be a financial burden to the faithful (1 Thess 2:9; 2Thess 3:7f; 1Cor 4:12; 9:15).

The city of Damascus in Syria is closely associated both with the activities of Paul the Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, and with his conversion and call. The beginnings of the Church in Damascus probably go back to the time of the first crises and conflicts within the mother church in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately the account in Acts is sketchy and rather coloured, but we can read between the lines and deduce the probable sequence of events. Luke, the author of Acts, is clearly intent on impressing his readers with the state of perfect harmony and accord existing in the early

Church. But at certain points in his narrative the information in his sources apparently clashed with his overall purpose and forced him to admit that there were some problems. Already in Chapters 4 and 5, he has reported persecutions from outside sources disturbing the tranquillity of the church. Then in Chapter 6 of Acts appears the first indication of dissension within the Jerusalem church itself, as an inner crisis disturbs the idyllic unity.

Acts 6:1-6 tells of dissension in the Church between parties whom Luke designates as 'Hellenists' and 'Hebrews'. Both of these parties were made up of Jews converted to Christianity. The Hellenists, however, came from the Diaspora and their mother tongue was Greek, while the Hebrews were of Palestinian origin and spoke Aramaic. There is no reason to query the trustworthiness of Luke's information up to this point.

He goes on to say that it was merely a problem in the rapidly growing church about common meals and provision for widows, and of the excessive burden being placed on the Twelve which prevented them from doing justice to their proper work of preaching the word and leading the people in prayer. As a result, Luke says, seven men were chosen – all of whom have Greek names, including Stephen and Philip – and by prayer and the laying on of the hands the apostles solemnly appointed them to a special charitable ministry.

However there is reason to suspect from what follows that the dissension in the Jerusalem Church went much deeper than matters of organization and administration. In Luke's subsequent narrative, the seven 'ministers' are not mentioned in the role of carrying out the relief of the poor. Instead Stephen and Philip are almost immediately depicted as preachers and debaters. Stephen in particular emerges as an evangelist and spokesman for the 'Hellenists'. He preached vehemently against the Jewish nation and was stoned to death by the mob to become the Church's first martyr. After his death the 'Hellenists' faced severe persecution and were forced to flee from Jerusalem. They scattered into non-Jewish areas and for the first time carried the gospel beyond Palestine.

Luke actually says in Acts 8:1 that the whole of the Jerusalem church was persecuted and scattered, with the exception of the Twelve. But here he seems to contradict himself, for later in his story he assumes as a matter of course the continued existence of a church there. The non-Hellenistic part of the Jerusalem church i.e. the Palestinian Jewish-Christians were probably left largely unmolested. It was the Hellenistic element which would have suffered because of its particular understanding of the gospel which was in such conflict with the Jewish view of the Law. It called into question temple worship, traditions sacred to the Jews, and their exclusive claim to salvation. All of these elements feature in Stephen's speech in Acts (7:2-53).

Such attitudes would have been anathema to Paul the zealous Pharisee. He was present at the stoning of Stephen and approved of it (Acts 7:58; 8:1), the first mention of him in Acts. And it is not surprising that his zeal came to be directed against a Hellenistic church like that of Damascus. More than once in his letters he specifies persecution of the church as one of the proofs of his righteousness according to the Law (Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6).

However, there are problems associated with the account in Acts of Paul's connections with Damascus. Luke tells us that he went there with the authority of the high priest to arrest the Damascus Christians and bring them before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin or High-Court. But Damascus was in the Roman province of Syria and far beyond the frontiers of Judea; and the Sanhedrin never had any jurisdiction in Syria. How then was Paul able to continue his campaign of intimidation against the Christians beyond the bounds of Judea?

It is not impossible that Paul was given authorisation from the Sanhedrin to persecute and even kidnap leading Christians in Damascus, if this could be done with impunity. Certainly there is no question of an official campaign authorised or approved by the Roman government. But taking into account the deficiencies of the police systems of the ancient world, an enterprising and determined fanatic could probably achieve a good deal in the way of violence, without attracting the attention of the

ruling power. Paul admits in his letters to having persecuted the church with particular violence, which no doubt went beyond smear campaigns and hostile propaganda.

At any rate, Paul himself agrees with Luke in saying that his conversion and call happened at or near Damascus. In Gal 1:17 he reveals that this experience took place away from Jerusalem ('nor did I go up to Jerusalem') and (at least) implies the Damascus setting – 'again I returned to Damascus', a city he had not previously mentioned. Paul tells us really nothing in his letters about this experience from the point of view of his religious experience or spiritual feelings. But what he does say agrees in its broad outlines with what Acts reports. What he does claim consistently in his letters is that he regarded the appearance of the risen Lord to him on this occasion as being on a par with the Resurrection appearances to the Twelve, and thereby constituting him an apostle (Gal 1:17; 1 Cor 9:1-5; 15:8).

Acts contains no fewer than three accounts of Paul's conversion and call. This in itself indicates its importance in Luke's view. While there are some variations in detail, and the descriptions obviously draw on Old Testament revelations and calls – with a possible touch of legendary embellishment, they nevertheless make up a magnificent and dramatic description. Common to all three accounts is the essential message conveyed to Paul. All three agree on this 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!' The impact of the Damascus vision established in Paul's consciousness two truths, and Luke's identification of these is confirmed by the theology of Paul's own letters: Jesus is Lord, and the Church is to be identified with him: 'Why do you persecute *ME*'?

Luke's description emphasises the overwhelming and unexpected character of the experience. And Paul himself states simply and unequivocally that the transformation brought about in him, from persecutor to disciple and apostle of Christ, was not due to any gradual maturing process. It was something for which he was totally unprepared, consciously at least; an intervention of the Lord which he calls a 'seizing' (Phil 3:12).

His birth to the faith was out of due time (1Cor 15:8). We must reject, therefore, suggestions that Paul's conversion was prepared for long in advance by some kind of psychological preconditioning; for example, that while still a devout Pharisee, he had come to question the foundations of his Jewish faith and practice; or that he became disillusioned with his efforts to comply with the high ideals and strict demands of the Law. On the contrary, his own description of himself as a zealous Pharisee, glorying in his righteousness according to the Law, hardly suggests that the person encountered by the Lord on the way to Damascus was one tormented by qualms of conscience or any feelings of inadequacy.

Paul tells us very little about his conversion and call to be an apostle. In Gal 1:15-17, however, he defends himself against extreme Jewish-Christian opponents who claimed he was not preaching the true gospel but was rather watering it down for the sake of the Gentiles by neglecting the demands of the Law. They also attacked his authority to be an apostle, apparently on the grounds that his commission did not come from Christ personally, as was the case with the Twelve.

Paul reacted vigorously against this two-pronged attack, taking as his models the prophetic calls of the Old Testament (Jer 1:5; Isa 49.1). Like Jeremiah and the Servant of Yahweh, Paul saw his apostolate as something predestined by God, preceding his very existence. Strenuously he defends both the truth of his gospel and the divine origin of his commission, by asserting his independence of all human authorities.

He insists on his independence of the Jerusalem church: the original apostles had nothing to do with his gospel or his mission to the Gentiles, but it was God, not men, who authorised both. This is already implied at the very beginning of his letter (Gal 1:1; cf. 11f). And to undermine his opponents' claim that his gospel differed from what the original apostles taught and authorised, Paul goes on to say that later at the meeting of apostles in Jerusalem they actually confirmed him in his freedom to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 2:1-9).

The distance which Paul places between himself and the Jerusalem church in Gal 1 might leave him open to the charge of being an individualist and an enthusiast. But it is necessary to see his stubborn assertion of independence in the context of his defence of his gospel and of his apostolate in the face of his opponents' attacks, and as Paul's way of stressing the divine origin of both his gospel and apostolic office. It would be wrong to infer from Gal 1 that he disregarded the early church's tradition about Christ. He does not claim the special revelation made to him as the only legitimisation and source of his call and

mission, nor does he wish to imply that it was more important and authoritative in his eyes than the traditions of the original apostles. This is not the question at issue, and in fact more than once in his letters Paul emphasises the continuity of his gospel with earlier tradition. The opposition between Paul and the twelve has been very much exaggerated by some critics.

In fact, Paul himself tells us in Gal 1:23f that the news of the missionary success of the former persecutor of the Church gave rise to joy and praise among the churches of Judea.

3. Paul's early missionary career

In our last session we looked at Paul's conversion, the sudden and dramatic transformation that changed him from being a dedicated opponent and persecutor of the new religious movement to being one of its most ardent devotees. The date of his conversion is uncertain. If we accept the year 30 CE as the year of Jesus' crucifixion, then Paul was probably converted and called by Christ within six years of the birth of the church, about the year 36 CE.

After his baptism in Damascus, Paul withdrew into Arabia (Gal 1:16f), that is, the Gentile region south-east of Damascus and east of the river Jordan (not present-day Saudi Arabia). We have no information about his activities there and can only speculate on how this time was spent. Frequently, in their reconstruction of Paul's life, writers speak of this period as a time of retreat spent in monastic solitude during which he meditated on the work he had been called to do, and prepared himself for it. Certainly he needed to assimilate the experience he had had, and to reconsider all his previous values and attitudes in the light of his call (see Phil 3:7-12). But it is not impossible that from the beginning, very soon after his conversion, he addressed himself to the task of preaching the gospel, as he had been charged to do, and engaged in some missionary work even at this early period, that is, in Arabia.

The kingdom of Arabia was by no means an isolated wilderness, but a region with well-known Greek-inspired cities like the magnificent Petra, the residence of King Aretas IV, who is mentioned by Paul himself in 2Cor 11:32, as well as Gerasa and Philadelphia (the modern Jordanian capital of Amman). It was also inhabited by numerous Bedouin tribesman, just as it is today.

Paul gives us no report of any churches established by him in this region or period, but this does not prove that he carried out no preaching ministry there. Perhaps his efforts met with little or no success. We do have an indication, however, that Paul's Arabian stay did arouse some hostility and possibly even

persecution, for back in Damascus, an official of King Aretas plotted against him, causing Paul to flee for his life and escape in a basket let down through a window or opening in the city wall (2 Cor 11:32).

According to Acts 9:23ff, it was the Jews who instigated this attempt on Paul's life. We are told that on his return to Damascus he antagonised the Jews there, by preaching that Jesus was the Messiah. If the account of Acts is to be taken as historical at this point, it indicates collusion between the Jews and the official of King Aretas, which is by no means impossible.

After his escape from Damascus, and now three years from the time of his call (therefore probably about 38/39 CE), Paul returned to Jerusalem to visit Peter, with whom he stayed fifteen days (Gal 1:18). Acts tells us (9:26-30) that he attempted to join the disciples there, but they were suspicious of him. It was Barnabas Luke says who introduced him to the apostles and explained to them the circumstances of Paul's conversion. He then began to preach in Jerusalem but aroused the opposition of the Jews who were determined to kill him. This caused him to leave for Caesarea, from where he sailed for Tarsus his home city.

The account in Acts may be accurate, but it is difficult to reconcile it with what Paul himself writes in Gal 1:18-20. He insists that he went to Jerusalem only to see Peter, and states explicitly that he 'did not see any of the other apostles'. Apart from Peter he saw only James, the brother of the Lord. He even goes so far as to confirm his testimony with an oath 'I swear before God that what I have written is the literal truth'. And fifteen days seems too brief a period to include all the activities described in Acts.

Sadly we have no reliable information about that first meeting between Peter and Paul. We may reasonably suppose that Paul would have wanted to discuss his understanding of the gospel with the leader of the Church. We may also presume that the meeting was an amicable one, and that

Peter raised no objections to Paul's understanding and preaching of the gospel. Paul apparently felt quite free to proceed with preaching the gospel to the pagans in his own characteristic way.

After his departure from Jerusalem, he preached the gospel in Syria and his native province of Cilicia (Gal 1:21). This squares well with what Acts tells up of his return to Tarsus (the capital of Cilicia). Tarsus probably became the headquarters for his apostolic work at this time. We infer from Galatians that his missionary activity was blessed with success, and led to the foundation of Christian communities. Paul says that the Jewish Christians of Judea, on hearing about the work of this former persecutor of the Church, 'gave glory to God' (Gal 1:22-24). And Acts later refers to flourishing Christian communities in Cilicia and Syria (15:23, 41), which were no doubt the result of Paul's missionary work in this period.

We do not know how long he worked in Syria and Cilicia. We know only that Barnabas, already mentioned in Acts in connection with Paul's visit to Jerusalem, now came to fetch him from Tarsus to work with him in Antioch. Antioch is a most important name in the history of early Christianity. It was the capital of the province of Syria, and was the third largest city of the Roman Empire, after Rome itself and Alexandria, with a population of over half a million. A flourishing Christian church had been founded there by the Hellenistic Jewish-Christians who had been driven out of Jerusalem earlier at the time of Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 11:19f). Thus at a very early date, and independently of Paul, the mission to the Gentiles had begun.

It was also at Antioch that the name 'Christian' was first given to the believers, thus clearly distinguishing them as a third distinct group alongside Jews and pagan Gentiles. Probably the name was first conferred on them by the Gentiles in a derogatory sense, but it was a badge they came to wear proudly.

Barnabas was evidently an important and influential figure in early Christianity. He was a Hellenistic-Jewish Christian from the island of

Cyprus, who was to work side by side with Paul for some considerable time, but at other times independently of him. According to Acts, he was sent to Antioch by the authorities in Jerusalem to investigate the situation there, when they heard of the new development of the gospel being preached successfully to the Gentiles. Barnabas was impressed with what he saw and, realising the opportunity which Antioch offered as a fertile mission field, he went to Tarsus to fetch Paul.

Some critics are sceptical about this alleged connection between Barnabas and the mother church of Jerusalem, and wonder whether it is not part of Luke's general concern to tie everything to Jerusalem and to have all apostolic activity authorised from there. They prefer to think that Barnabas was one of those forced to flee from Jerusalem after Stephen's death, and that he was very much involved in the foundation of the church at Antioch. This is possible, but there is no basis for this view in the biblical text.

Whatever about this, Paul's coming to Antioch marked a new phase in his ministry. From now on, Antioch was to become the headquarters for his apostolic work.

Acts now describes a missionary campaign undertaken by Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus and Asia Minor. This campaign is usually referred to as Paul's 'first' missionary journey. Our knowledge of it is completely dependent on Acts, but although Paul makes no reference to it in his letters, there is absolutely no reason to question the basic historical truth of Luke's report.

The city of Antioch in Syria has now become the new base of Paul's missionary operations. Acts 13:1-3 tells how the community at Antioch solemnly commissioned 'Barnabas and Saul' to embark on their missionary tour. Indeed it was the Holy Spirit who sent them out. Note how Luke gives precedence to Barnabas in the first part of the account, suggesting that he was the real leader at the outset. Taking John Mark of Jerusalem with them, they sailed to Cyprus, Barnabas' native country. At Paphos, in Cyprus, the Roman pro-consul Sergius Paulus was won over to the faith (vv 4-12). In connection with this Luke paints a very vivid picture of how Paul

came into conflict with a Jewish magician, who was attached to the court of the pro-consul.

This magician tried to prevent the conversion of Sergius Paulus by Paul, who called down the judgment of God upon him for wickedness. So impressed was the pro-consul that he became a believer.

From Cyprus, the missionaries crossed the sea to the mainland of Asia Minor, and landed at Perge in Pamphylia. We are told that John Mark left the team there and returned to Jerusalem, an incident which would have later repercussions on the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. From Perge they made their way inland to the towns of southern Galatia, their first stop being another Antioch in the region of Pisidia. Here we have a report of the first of two sermons attributed by Luke to Paul in this section. It is delivered in the synagogue (13:16-41), and is a long, typical missionary sermon to a synagogue audience. It is very similar in structure, thought, and even language, to speeches attributed to Peter in the earlier part of Acts.

In Antioch and other places visited by Paul, Luke presents a typical pattern of Paul's preaching and its results. The missionaries always preach first to the Jews, but failing to win over any appreciable number, they then turn to the Gentiles, beginning with the 'God-fearers' or 'God-worshippers', the name given to those Gentiles who have had an adherence to Judaism but are not full converts. Invariably remarkable success is achieved. At Iconium, as at Antioch, the Jews instigate persecution of the missionaries. Again at Lystra, Paul's efforts meet with success till Jews arrive from Antioch and have him stoned. Nevertheless the number of converts was so great that, after moving on to Derbe, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps, returned to the towns previously visited, appointed elders or presbyters and left well-organised communities (Acts 14:22).

Luke also records a miracle at Lystra, the healing of a cripple (14:8-14). Some critics suspect a degree of legendary embellishment, for a similar story was circulating in pagan circles. The miracle, we are told, so amazed the pagan population of Lystra that they believed that their

gods had come to visit them in the human forms of Paul and Barnabas. Only with great difficulty did they manage to restrain the mob's wild excitement. A priest of Zeus was already bringing garlands, and animals for a sacrificial offering. When Paul and Barnabas preached the true God and attacked the practice of idolatry, the crowd became even more enthusiastic. Then the Jews arrived from Antioch, and as a result of their intervention, the enthusiasm quickly turned to hostility. Paul was stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead.

It is from Lystra, too, that we have the second sample of Paul's preaching in this section; this time a brief summary of a talk to a pagan audience (14:15-17). This is one of only two samples given in Acts of the preaching of the gospel to purely pagan audiences. A fuller example occurs in 17:22ff at Athens. Appeal is made now not to Old Testament prophecy – as with the Jews at Antioch in 13:16ff – but to God the Creator revealing Himself in nature.

After returning to Perge, the missionaries sailed for Antioch in Syria, thus bringing this great missionary tour to a successful conclusion.

The many conversions made and the Gentile churches founded by Paul during this missionary campaign brought problems to the young Church. In particular the influx of Gentiles raised the burning issue of the relationship between Gentile Christians, and the older converts from Judaism. Were the new converts to be circumcised and made to observe the Mosaic Law? Were they to adhere to the strict Pharisaic regulations on the matter of food? These problems were at their most acute when Paul and his companions returned to Antioch, and they led to convening of the historic assembly or so-called 'Council' of Jerusalem which probably took place about the year 49 CE.

This apostolic Council or assembly was surely the most important event in the history of the early Church. Paul himself (Gal 2:1-10) and Acts (Ch. 15) give detailed accounts of its proceedings; and each account, each in its own way, reveals its momentous significance. With great artistry, Luke situates it squarely in the middle of the book of Acts, and its key position makes it a

watershed in his narration. Prior to Chapter 15, his account has revolved around the Jerusalem church and its leaders, and Peter in particular. Following the Council, they disappear from the stage, which is left exclusively to Paul and to his activities.

Again, the question of the historical value of Luke's presentation has to be raised and carefully considered, in view of the claims of some critics that Chapter 15 is entirely his own creation and unreliable as history. It was composed, they argue, long after the event at a time when the matters at issue were no longer seen as relevant, and represents Luke's idealised view of the church and its history. Consequently, what comes through in Acts 15 is a picture of a unified church, not nearly as divided as was the case in fact. We must see to what extent this negative assessment of the historicity of Luke's account is justified.

It is well to remember that Paul's version of the assembly in Gal 2 cannot reasonably be seen as a full and exact record either. Paul was himself writing a few years after the event in the specific context of the attacks being made upon him in Galatia. The whole thrust of his account is therefore defensive and argumentative, as he defends the truth of his gospel and the validity of his own apostolic calling against his opponents. So while we may proceed on the principle that Paul's own account should be accepted as the primary and most important source of information, we must not lose sight of the fact that his version of the event is given from an apologetic standpoint, and is condensed and presented with his own actual situation uppermost in mind.

Paul's description of the occasion of the Council is in fact confirmed by Acts. Returning to Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas reported their successful mission to the community there. The rejoicing caused by this news was soon dampened by the arrival of some Jewish-Christians from Judea, demanding that all – Jewish and Gentile

Christians alike – should be circumcised and made to observe the Law (Acts 15:1ff). This gave rise to a dispute; and to clarify the question, it was resolved that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem to consult the original apostles. When Acts says that these men from Judea came to Antioch without authorisation (v 24), it confirms what we can deduce from Paul's description in Galatians 2:1-10, our primary source of information for this sequence of events.

The whole course of the subsequent discussions shows that the troublemakers were not official envoys of the Twelve or the Jerusalem church, even if they claimed to be so. Instead Paul refers to them as 'false brethren brought in' (Gal 2:4). In fact, those whom Paul refers to as 'the pillars' of the church, James, Peter and John, would later approve of his preaching to the Gentiles of a gospel not requiring observance of the Law; so it is impossible that they would have sent these Jewish Christians to Antioch with any official commission. The troublemakers in Antioch must have been a group of Jewish-Christian extremists, representing a school of thought opposed to the now considerable number of Gentile Christians. Paul leaves us in no doubt about their purpose: it was 'to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage' (Gal 2:4). They were therefore in the same mould as those who would later stir up trouble for Paul in Galatia. For Paul, their activity at Antioch put at stake 'the truth of the gospel' and the 'freedom' of faith (Gal 2:5) demanding as they did the submission of the Gentile Christians to the requirements of the Jewish Law.

Paul says that this visit to Jerusalem was occasioned by a 'revelation' (Gal 2:2), a detail not mentioned in Acts. Perhaps his observation has the intention of making it clear that he was not summoned to Jerusalem by the apostles. He was not cited to appear before them and 'show cause', so to speak. He went because God revealed to him that he should go.

4. Crisis in early Christianity

In our last session, we began to speak about the 'Council' or the Assembly of the Apostles in Jerusalem. The actual question at issue at the Jerusalem Council needs to be clearly understood. In Gal 2:1-10 Paul leaves us with the impression that the only issue raised and resolved was that of circumcision. The same impression is gained from Acts 15:6-12 the vital question was a doctrinal one whether salvation depended on faith in Christ – or on faith, *plus* circumcision and the observance of the Law of Moses. Acts Chapter 15, would indicate that the Council also decided the disciplinary question of the observance of food regulations (15:13-29), but this was a separate issue, which should not be confused with that of circumcision and the real basis of salvation.

This issue had probably been smouldering under the surface for some time, but the spectacular success of Paul's missionary tour had now brought it to a head. Significantly, and provocatively, Paul took with him to Jerusalem the one who was afterward to be his fellow worker, Titus, an uncircumcised Greek. Either as an ultimatum or a compromise, it was at once urgently demanded of Paul that he should circumcise Titus. But he tells us he did not submit to such pressure even for a moment (Gal. 2:5).

Modern readers may find difficulty in understanding why such an archaic ritual prescription as circumcision should have been the key issue it was. We must not underestimate, however, its importance as a problem in the early Church. For strict Jews and Jewish Christians, circumcision was the indispensable sign of the covenant which God made long ago with Abraham for his descendants and which assured the Jews that they belonged to the chosen people. Rabbi Akiba called it the 'seal of election', and for the Jews it thus represented much more than a merely ritual regulation, having become rather a profession of Faith. They saw in it an act of obedience to God's will and to the demand that they should keep themselves separate from the heathen world around them. Jewish Christians would have seen it as involving the crucial question of the continuity of God's saving history,

and thus inextricably bound up with their claim to be the *true* Israel. Was not the God of the Christian faith also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? So at the apostolic council, what was at stake was the unity of the people of God and of its history, and the whole question of salvation. Consequently, it would be wrong to dismiss Paul's opponents as reactionary ritualists or to see Paul himself as a headstrong innovator not prepared to make the slightest compromise in non-essentials. The matter was, in fact, essential to his understanding of the gospel.

Paul's account in Galatians leaves us with the impression that he was the principal figure at the Council and the really controversial figure, and given the circumstances which occasioned the assembly, he must have played a leading part in its deliberations. His regard for the status and authority of Peter, the Twelve and Jerusalem is combined with a strong assertion of independence, seen in his slightly disparaging references to the leaders of the Jerusalem church as 'those who were of repute' and 'who were reputed to be pillars' (Gal 2:2,6,9). He even says in v 6: 'What they were makes no difference to me', indicating that he was not overawed by the prestige they had gained by being eye-witnesses of Jesus ministry. Such an experience and such prestige could not outweigh the truth of the gospel which he had received from God. And in fact they 'added nothing' to him (v 6), thus confirming him in his conviction that his gospel of salvation independently of the Law was not defective, despite the claims of his opponents.

There is no reason to suppose that the agreement reached was a political compromise. Paul goes on to say explicitly that the apostles acted as they did because they realised that God's grace had authorised him to preach among the Gentiles, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the Jews (Gal 2:7). On these terms, the unity of the Church was sealed by the Jerusalem authorities' giving to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (Gal 2:9).

Paul mentions one further resolution of the

assembly, about which Acts is silent: 'only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do' (Gal 2, 10). It would be wrong to see this as simply an insignificant post-script. Its importance is clear from Paul's preoccupation with the 'collection' in his later correspondence (1Cor 16; 2Cor 8-9; Rom 15: 25ff.). It refers probably to more than just alleviation of material needs the pains taken by Paul himself (and his churches in Galatia, Macedonia and Greece) in discharging this duty suggest that the reason was not simply charity. Rather, the collection undertaken throughout the Gentile Christian churches was intended primarily as a token of their recognition of the special status of the mother-church of Jerusalem, as an expression of thanksgiving for the blessings that had gone forth from Jerusalem to the whole world (Rom 15:27). The purpose of the collection seems to have been to mark the *unity* of the Church and the equal status of its members, Jewish and Gentile. This assessment seems necessary to explain the eagerness with which Paul's churches, at his instigation, espoused the project, his own untiring efforts to organise it, and the depth of his theological reflection on its significance – as revealed in his letters. It is perhaps noteworthy also that in late Judaism and early Christianity, the term 'the poor' had come to mean not simply the underprivileged, but the true Israel, the faithful remnant, the 'little flock', and would thus be perfectly applicable to the Christians of Jerusalem, the mother church.

For Luke, too, the Council marks an important turning point in his story of the primitive Church. The Word of the risen Christ in Acts 1: 8: 'you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth', has been working itself out throughout his narrative. And although Antioch has already come into its own as the new centre of missionary activity, Jerusalem has been the focal point of Luke's narrative. He has noted that towns and districts which were evangelised in Judea, Samaria, and Syria, were incorporated into the mother church by its envoys.

Significantly Luke agrees with Paul in

identifying the reason for the Councils convocation. It was because 'some men ... from Judea' were teaching at Antioch that salvation was impossible without circumcision as laid down in the law of Moses. At issue was the fundamental question of the necessity of the Law for salvation.

Luke reports that after considerable discussion Peter arose to address the gathering. His intervention is understandable and necessary on the basis of the Cornelius incident described in Acts 10:1; 11:18. Peter, impelled by the Holy Spirit, took the initiative of receiving an uncircumcised Gentile and his household into the Christian community. The Cornelius incident stands out in Acts as a kind of introduction to the apostolic council in Chapter 15, and is presented as revealing the shape of things to come. Peter expressly states that by God's will he had long ago and for the first time proclaimed the Gospel to Gentiles (15:7-11) and thus indicates that the issue has already been decided in principle (cf. 11, 18). It remains only for him to obtain the official approval of the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church. His words in v 11 bring the discussion to a close: 'But we believe that we (Jewish Christians) shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they (Gentile Christians) will'.

Thus does Luke's account establish, in accordance with his overall perspective, that Paul and Barnabas were not the first to take the important step of evangelising the Gentiles. This mission was initiated by Peter himself, the Leader of the Church. It is to be noted that Paul and Barnabas play only a minor role in Luke's version of the assembly. There is no report of any speeches made by them, though by way of an appendix, he relates in v 12 that the assembly listened to their account of the missionary success they had achieved among the Gentiles. Their only appearance in the proceedings is in fact to relate the wonders which God worked through them. Luke seems to highlight Peter's contribution, and play down that of Paul.

After the Council, Paul would have returned to Antioch, and Peter apparently followed him soon afterwards. Gal 2:11-16 reports a serious confrontation between the two, arising out of the

fact that Peter compromised himself on the question of eating meals with Gentile Christians. Paul tells us that Peter at first 'ate with the Gentiles' but later when 'certain men' came from Jerusalem and were critical of Peter's conduct, he separated himself from Gentile company and led other Jewish Christians, including even Barnabas, to do the same. Paul felt obliged to protest this breach of principle and 'opposed (Peter) to his face'. He accused Peter of acting insincerely and of not being 'straightforward about the truth of the gospel' (Gal 2:11-14). Though he does not say so explicitly, Paul implies that his protest on this occasion was successful.

Returning to the actual council proceedings (Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15:6-11), we have seen how Luke assigns a relatively minor role to Paul and Barnabas. Although it would be going too far to say that he portrays Paul as simply accepting a decision and not playing some part in forming it, Paul's contribution is referred to very briefly in Acts (v 12). It stands in sharp contrast with his own version in Galatians. For, although Paul and the church at Antioch acknowledged the status of Jerusalem and the Twelve, the impression given by him is that Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian churches met at Jerusalem on an equal footing and that the meeting was held at the initiative of the church of Antioch.

Luke's version on the other hand has the effect of exalting the apostles and the leadership of the Jerusalem church at the expense of Antioch and the part played by Paul and Barnabas. To query the accuracy of his account is not to deny his right to be called a 'historian'. He knew there had been a controversy over circumcision, and that the Jerusalem church, in spite of pressure from Jewish-Christian extremists, had in the end accepted Gentile Christians into the Church without demanding circumcision from them. From the point of view of the historian looking at the events in perspective, this was the really significant fact.

Luke makes no mention of the quarrel between Peter and Paul at Antioch. Paul tells us in Galatians that Peter originally had no scruples about taking part in the common meal (which probably included celebration of the Eucharist) in

the mixed Jewish-Gentile church of Galatia. But when 'certain men came from James' in Jerusalem, he separated himself for fear of the Jews. Paul strongly condemned this conduct as 'insincerity' (Gal 2:13), and rebuked Peter publicly in the presence of the whole church (vv 14ff).

For Paul, the quarrel was not a question of a disagreement about trivialities, on which he should have been prepared to compromise. For him it was a basic question of principle, with nothing less than the gospel and the faith at stake. He saw Peter's inconsistency as tantamount to a denial of this principle: namely, that a person is justified not by doing what the Law commands, but by faith; whereas Peter's conduct implied that he and his fellow Jewish-Christians still saw the regulations of the Jewish Law as of obligation. Their conduct thus put pressure on Gentile Christians also to submit to Jewish customs.

But Paul was convinced that in this matter of common meals between Jews and Gentiles, basic issues like the unity of the Church, the setting aside of the Law as the way of salvation; and consequently the very truth of the gospel, were all involved. Characteristically, in keeping with his earlier attitude on the question of the circumcision of Titus at the Council Paul saw Peter's lapse into legalism at Antioch as touching the very heart of the gospel message. He was not prepared to compromise or make any concession for the sake of a superficial unity and harmony.

Paul certainly deserves to be called the apostle to the Gentiles. As far as we know, no other missionary in the early years of the Church had set his sights so high, or planned to carry the gospel to the farthest limits of the inhabited world. The 'Hellenists' had already carried the message of salvation to the Gentiles. But no-one before Paul had proclaimed to them a Gospel not requiring observance of the Jewish Law. And even Paul's missionary work among the Gentiles up to this point – in Arabia (perhaps), Syria, Cilicia, Antioch, Cyprus, and the south of Asia Minor – gave no indication that his horizons were world-wide.

It was probably during his second great

missionary journey, when he and his companions travelled as far as Greece that his missionary plans came to embrace the whole world. Acts gives relatively brief notes about this campaign which took Paul from Antioch, through Asia Minor (where he founded churches in Galatia,) then from Troas across to Europe for the first time. There he established the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth, all known to us from his letters as well as from Acts.

Perhaps at the start of this tour, or at least during his journey through Asia Minor, Paul and his companions took some far-reaching and important decisions. There are indications of this in the sketchy account in Acts of this journey, which we shall now trace in some detail.

The trip began on a not very encouraging note, as Paul and Barnabas had a falling-out over John Mark, Barnabas' cousin. (Acts 15:36ff) Barnabas wanted to take Mark along as a member of the party, but Paul refused on the grounds of his desertion of them on the previous journey. Consequently, Barnabas parted company with Paul and took John Mark with him to Cyprus.

Paul chose instead Silas as his second-in-command, and set out overland, travelling through Syria and Cilicia, and revisiting the churches which he had founded earlier. In Lystra, Paul acquired a new fellow-worker called Timothy, the son of a pagan father and a Jewish-Christian mother who was held in high repute by Christians of the district (16:1-2) and who is mentioned frequently in Paul's letters. Their subsequent itinerary is described by Luke: Phrygia, Galatia, the borders of Mysia, and finally Troas, which was separated from the continent of Europe by only a few miles of water.

In these few verses (Acts 16:6-10), we are told that Paul and his companions (on three separate occasions) experienced God's direct intervention about their objectives. First, the Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching the gospel in the Roman province of Asia in the south-west (v 6). Then 'the Spirit of Jesus' prevented them from going north to Bithynia (v 7). There is no reason for doubting Luke's information at this point. Both Asia and Bithynia would have provided the missionaries with fertile fields for their

apostolate, but instead they travelled diagonally across the central part of Asia Minor to the port of Troas, where for the third time they received divine direction. Here Paul had a vision at night, in which a man from Macedonia begged him to come over to his country (v 9). Paul and his companions obeyed immediately, and sailing from Troas, they arrived at Philippi, one of the leading cities of Macedonia (v 12). All of this information is given in a few verses of Acts, with the important change from the third person '*they*' to the first person '*we*' in v 10. This indicates that at this point Luke himself became a travelling companion of Paul.

This journey across Asia Minor must have taken longer and been less direct than we would infer from Acts. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us that on the way through Galatia he became ill. It was therefore probably during an involuntary stay there that he founded the Galatian church (cf. Gal 4:13-14: 'you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first').

Philippi was very much a Roman city. It was there that the murderers of Julius Caesar were defeated by Octavian and Mark Anthony in 42 B.C.E. When Octavian later became emperor as Caesar Augustus, he commemorated the victory by declaring Philippi a city and making it a settlement for the veterans of his military campaigns, at the same time conferring on it all the privileges of a Roman city.

Paul was apparently successful in establishing a large Gentile Christian community there, his first foundation on the continent of Europe; and he kept closer ties with this church afterwards than with any other (Phil 4, 15). Nevertheless, he encountered bitter opposition and persecution.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:2, he will recall how he 'had suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi'. Acts 16:19 ff describes how Paul and Silas were severely beaten on the orders of the Roman magistrates and imprisoned. According to the account in Acts, the illegality of their treatment forces Paul to appeal to his Roman citizenship, and this drew from the magistrates an apology and a polite request to leave the city (16:35-39).

The author of Acts shows his awareness that the

foundation of the church at Philippi marked a new and significant phase in the life of Paul and the early church. The haste with which he described Paul's journey across Asia Minor prior to his arrival in Philippi and his lengthy description of the origin of the church there are sufficient indication of this. Paul will himself later confirm the significance of this new stage in his work. (Phil 4:15). We are almost completely dependent on Acts for our knowledge of incidents connected with the foundation of the Philippian church. But the fact that Luke was now himself a member of Paul's entourage gives added reliability to his account.

Apparently the Jewish population in Philippi was not large enough to warrant a synagogue, because on the Sabbath, Paul and Silas (and Luke) went to a place of prayer by the river outside the city, where the small Jewish community met to worship. There they sat and talked with some women, one of whom was Lydia, who came from Asia Minor and was a dealer in purple dyed cloth.

She is described as a 'worshipper of God', the technical expression for those Gentiles who were attached to the Jewish community, but not full converts. 'The Lord opened her heart' to the gospel (v 14), and she was baptised along with her household, and prevailed on Paul and his companions to stay at her house. This then was the simple and unspectacular beginning of Christianity on the continent of Europe.

5. Christian beginnings in Europe

In our last session, we followed Paul, Silas and Luke as far as Philippi, where Paul founded the first Christian Church on the continent of Europe. Luke describes in Acts 16:13-15, the conversion of Lydia and her household. Then follows the vivid and dramatic account of opposition and persecution, and Paul's first conflict with Roman officials. It began, according to Acts, with his exorcism of a slave-girl. This had the effect of ruining her owners business, since the girl's fortune-telling had been a good source of income. And so Paul and Silas were seized and brought before the Roman magistrates, accused of disturbing the peace and advocating unlawful customs. As a result they were scourged and thrown into prison.

But this misfortune was soon miraculously turned into a blessing. With their feet in the stocks, Paul and Silas, about midnight, were praying and singing hymns, when a sudden earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, burst open the doors and shattered the bonds of all the prisoners. When he awoke and saw the prison door open, the jailer drew his sword and was about to commit suicide, when Paul prevented him. The jailer and all his family believed and were baptised. Then the magistrates, filled with fear and eager to be rid of their disturbing prisoners, ordered Paul and Silas to be released. Paul, however, insisted on their rights as Roman citizens and obtained an apology from the magistrates.

Paul himself in 1Thess 2:2 speaks only of 'suffering and shameful treatment' at Philippi, and gives no indication of any such happy or harmonious conclusion to the affair. Besides, if Paul's stay at Philippi was so brief and ended as abruptly as Acts suggests, it is difficult to see how so few believers could have grown into the flourishing community which Paul would address in his letter to the Philippians a few years later.

Leaving Philippi, the missionaries arrived at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1). Philippi was the starting point of the famous road to the west, the Via Egnatia, which was an important commercial

and military route linking the eastern and western parts of the empire. Paul and his companions travelled on the road as far as Thessalonica. He then turned off, and instead of following it west to the Adriatic Sea and even further to Italy and Rome, he went south into Greece, through Berea and Athens, to Corinth.

If not earlier, at least on this journey through Macedonia, from Philippi to Thessalonica, Paul's thoughts were probably on Rome. In his letter to the Romans, he says that he had long planned to come to Rome and preach the gospel there, but had been prevented (1:13; 15:22). At the time of leaving Philippi (late 50 or early 51), Paul probably had no knowledge of the existence of a Christian church in Rome. But by the time he wrote the letter to the Romans seven or eight years later, he had learned something of the Roman Church.

One source of his information must have been Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish-Christian married couple whom he will meet in Corinth, and who had apparently been members of the church in Rome before their expulsion by the emperor Claudius. We shall meet this influential couple later in our story. Although it was Paul's principle never to preach where the name of Christ had already been proclaimed (Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 10:15f.), he did not abandon his idea of visiting the capital of the empire, even after hearing that a church was already in existence there, because Rome was so central to his plans for a mission to Spain and the west (Rom 15:24, 28).

The first obstacle which Paul struck in the way of his Roman plans was the persecution he suffered in Thessalonica at the hands of the pagan civic authorities, again instigated by the Jews (Acts 17:5ff.; 1Thess 2:14ff.; 3:1ff.). Again, Acts is our main source of information about the beginnings of the church at Thessalonica (17:1-10), the modern Saloniki. This city, about one hundred miles to the south-west of Philippi, had been founded in 314 BCE by Alexander the Great. It had been named after Alexander's half-sister.

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, and the residence of the pro-consul. At Paul's time there was a colony of Jews numerous and wealthy enough to have its own synagogue (17:1).

While again we may query the historical accuracy of some of the details contained in the account of Acts, there is no reason to question the main points of Luke's narrative. Again Paul's first approach was to the Jews, and he preached in their synagogue on three successive sabbaths, winning to the faith some Jews, as well as 'many of the devout Greeks' (the 'worshippers of God') and several of the 'leading women' (17:4). Paul's success among Jews and proselytes aroused the fury of other Jews, who stirred up the mob and 'set the city in an uproar' (v 5). They attacked the house of a certain Jew who had given lodgings to Paul and his companions. Jason and some other converts were dragged before the city authorities and charged with aiding and abetting a movement that preached rebellion against the Emperor by setting up a rival king, Jesus. Jason and his companions were released on bail or a bond, but Paul and Silas were smuggled out of Thessalonica under cover of night and sent to Berea, to the south-west in central Greece.

Again, as with his account of Paul's activities at Philippi, one senses that Luke, through scarcity of information, has very much abbreviated the length of Paul's stay in Thessalonica. Paul's own letters suggest that his work there must have occupied several months, during which time he earned his own living: 'we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God' (1Thess 2:9) And in 1:7, he gives expression to his joy that the church of Thessalonica has had such a powerful spiritual influence on all the neighbouring region.

In Berea, too, Paul met with initial success both among Jews and Greeks. But hearing of his success, Jews from Thessalonica pursued him and stirred up trouble in Berea also. As a result of this, Paul was sent on to Athens by ship, leaving Silas and Timothy behind. In 1 Thess 3:1-2, however, Paul indicates that Timothy went with him to Athens and later returned to Thessalonica. Luke's information is either

abridged or inaccurate, but the discrepancy is not important.

Acts describes at length Paul's ministry in Athens (17:16-34), a section which includes the famous speech preached on the Areopagus or 'Hill of Mars' (17:22-31).

Although Athens had been renowned in its past history and cultures, in Paul's time it was politically quite insignificant. It was still, however, a centre of Greek intellectual life, and a symbol of Greek learning and piety. It thus provides the ideal stage for Luke to give us a sample discourse of Paul's proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. We see here Christianity and Greek philosophy in open confrontation.

On being invited to address the Areopagus, a kind of 'cultural council', Paul launched into his speech. It provides a striking contrast, both in content and approach, to the samples given by Luke of Paul's speeches to Jewish audiences (such as the one at Antioch in Pisidia: Acts 13:16-41). Only at the very end of the speech does Paul introduce the name of Jesus as judge of the world, and proclaim the resurrection of the dead, and this at once moves some to mockery.

The speech does, however, show us something of how the Christian gospel as understood by Paul conflicts with natural man's way of thinking, a theme which we will see him develop in 1Cor 1-3. A basic idea of the Areopagus speech in Acts 17 is that natural knowledge of God is possible by human reason. And Paul in his letters too uses the idea that God has revealed himself to all people in the things that have been created, and can so be known by human reason (Rom 1). It is also noteworthy that Paul at Athens had nothing to say about Christ crucified – 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles' (1Cor 1:23). But this too squares well with what Paul will later confess in 1Cor 2:1-4.

This suggests that in Athens Paul, in attempting to adapt his message to his audience and to Greek culture and philosophy, adopted a style of preaching which ended in failure. Consequently, from then on he renounced all forms of oratory modelled on Greek wisdom (1Cor 1:18ff.), and resolved to proclaim the word of the cross.

After leaving Athens, Paul went on to Corinth where he arrived saddened and discouraged (1 Thess 3:3f; 1Cor 2:3). He decided to abandon the philosophical or 'wisdom' approach and to preach the 'folly' (foolishness) of the cross. We shall see this change of emphasis in Paul's preaching of the death of Jesus in 1 Corinthians, a change dictated largely by his sobering experience at Athens.

From Corinth, where he stayed and worked for more than eighteen months (Acts 18:11, 18), Paul wrote his letter (or letters) to the Thessalonians. The date generally assigned to the first letter is the early part of 51 CE., soon after his arrival in Corinth.

Before looking at the contents of 1 Thessalonians, we might return to the point we made previously about Paul's probable change of plans during this missionary campaign. We have seen how the uprising in Thessalonica led to his forced withdrawal to Berea, and how a similar situation drove him on to Athens. Not only does Paul make little reference to his Athenian experience in his correspondence, but in all probability Athens was not included in his original missionary plans at all.

Probably, Paul wanted instead to go to Rome at an early date, but was forced by circumstances to postpone his journey there. Not only those external circumstances like persecution in Thessalonica, but also the needs and growing pains of the infant churches that he had founded demanded his presence and attention. Yet even these needs and demands never deflected him from his deep-seated ambition, to visit Rome and undertake a mission in the west, as far as Spain.

Paul's great plan is perhaps the key to understanding his whole missionary strategy. It is with amazement that we see how swiftly he covered the extensive areas where he worked. Often he left his newly founded churches very quickly without delaying to care for them and train them. Not that he was indifferent to his spiritual children whom he left behind. His great sense of care and responsibility for them shines out in his letters. And yet for the most part he had to be content to commit the further direct care of them to his fellow workers and confine his

personal contact to letters and occasional visits. His letters in fact reveal an unmistakable tension between the wide sweep of his missionary plans and care for his churches. More than once his sense of responsibility compelled him to change or postpone the master plan. But his great goal of carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth filled him with a sense of urgency which kept him constantly on the move.

At Athens, before moving on to Corinth, Paul made several attempts to return to Macedonia but was unable to do so (1 Thess 2:18). So he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica 'to strengthen and encourage you in your faith' (1 Thess 3:2). Paul knew that the persecution he had suffered there was no doubt now being directed against the community (1 Thess 3:3-5). When Timothy returned from his mission to rejoin Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5), the news he brought was encouraging, and helped to ease Paul's disappointment over his failure at Athens.

Timothy reported that, despite persecution, the Christian community at Thessalonica was standing firm in the faith (1Thess 3:6). However, he probably brought with him a letter from them to Paul, containing a number of questions. Their main preoccupation was about the return of Christ, his Second Coming – or what is called in the New Testament his 'Parousia'. We deduce this from the space which Paul devotes to this question in his two letters to them which have survived. It appears that the Thessalonians were concerned with two aspects in particular: the time of Christ's return, and whether Christians who had already died would be at a disadvantage when Christ should come again.

Such preoccupations might strike us as odd today, but we must remember that these letters of Paul were written only 20 years after the crucifixion and resurrection. Furthermore, they were written to a community whose instruction in the faith had probably been cut short by Paul's sudden and enforced departure from Thessalonica.

Of the two questions which they raised, Paul tackles first the one concerning the fate of believers who have already died. He treats this problem in 1 Thess 4:13-18, introducing his

treatment by the words: 'We would not have you ignorant, brothers, concerning those who are asleep, lest you grieve as others do who have no hope'. Some of the Thessalonians were anxious about the eternal welfare of their loved ones who had fallen asleep, or died, since their baptism. How will they share in Christ's triumph when he returns in his glory to claim those who belong to him?

The fact that they were disturbed by such an issue seems to suggest that the Thessalonians expected that Christ was to return very soon. Had Paul left them with that impression when he preached the gospel to them? It is very likely that at this early stage, Paul did in fact believe in the imminent return of Christ. Or at least, that he hoped strongly for the speedy return of Christ, when he would complete his work and establish God's kingdom in its final and perfect phase. Perhaps this hope had been expressed so ardently by Paul that the Thessalonians convinced themselves that Christ's return was indeed imminent.

The other problem about their query is, that it would seem to indicate Paul had not explained to them how the resurrection of Christ was the guarantee of their own resurrection. This however seems unlikely, as this appears to have been an essential part of the message of Paul from the beginning. Certainly, by the time he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul was strongly affirming the solidarity of Christians with the risen Lord, and teaching that Christ's resurrection was the pledge of theirs (1Cor 15). Possibly however he had not taught this with the same clarity or emphasis at Thessalonica.

No doubt he taught the doctrine of the resurrection of Christians, and that of the Parousia or Second Coming of Christ. But perhaps he did not clarify the connection between the two. At any rate, the Thessalonians were probably so convinced of Christ's return within a short time that they saw no need for resurrection – since all of them would still be living. Consequently when death claimed some of their number, they lapsed into the kind of hopeless grief which was more typical of their former pagan attitude to death, than of those who have put their faith and hope in Christ.

Consequently, when Paul heard from Timothy of their difficulties, he hastened to write to them, intent on building up and reinforcing their hope. From the very beginning of the letter, it is obvious that hope is to be Paul's main theme. In 1:3, instead of the usual order of faith, hope and love, Paul lists these three fundamental Christian virtues with hope in the position of pre-eminence.

In 4:13-18, he assures the Thessalonians that physical death will not put believers at a disadvantage. In fact, he says, those who have died will experience the glory of Christ's triumphant return by rising first. He refers to the dead as 'those who have fallen asleep'. This was a common way of referring to death in ancient times, and of itself the expression does not contain any allusion to subsequent resurrection, or immortality of the soul. In the Old Testament, 'to sleep with one's fathers' simply meant 'to be buried with one's family'. In later Judaism, in the last couple of centuries before Christ, many of the Jews came to believe in a resurrection to eternal life (see Dan 12:2-3), and this opened up the way to a new understanding of the 'sleep' of death – namely, as a sleep that would be followed by an awakening. Thus Jesus referred both to the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:39) and to Lazarus (John 11:11) as being asleep, because he knew they were to rise. From then on, to 'fall asleep' became a term for Christian death in anticipation of resurrection. In this sense, it occurs frequently in Paul's writings, especially in 1 Corinthians 15.

In the third century, burial grounds came to be called a 'koimeterion', of which the word 'cemetery' is the English equivalent. The word means 'sleeping quarters'. Interestingly, an early Christian inscription has been unearthed at Thessalonica itself, which reads 'the sleeping-place (koimeterion) until the resurrection'.

Paul's main purpose in writing 1 Thessalonians was not so much to correct error, but to comfort and console (see 4:18). He contrasts the hope which should distinguish Christians from the pagans, 'those who have no hope' (4:14). Christian grief should thus also be of a different variety. The hopelessness of pagans in the face of death is testified by a number of tomb

inscriptions like 'Be consoled, no man is immortal', and by passages in classical Greek plays, such as 'For us, when the short light has once set, remains to be slept the sleep of one unbroken night'.

The basis of the new Christian approach to death is indicated by Paul in v 14: 'If we believe that

Jesus died and rose again, so with him God will bring also those who have fallen asleep through Jesus'. By describing deceased Christians as 'those who have fallen asleep through Jesus', Paul is affirming that Jesus' death has changed the very meaning of death – it has now become a sleep, to which is attached the pledge or guarantee of an 'awakening' to a new life.

6. Paul the letter-writer

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was prompted in part by the anxiety which the Thessalonian Christians were experiencing about the Second Coming of Christ – about its time, and about the fate of those Christians who had already died prematurely. Paul tackled the latter of the concerns in 1 Thess 4:13-18. He first pointed out that Christ's death and resurrection has changed the very meaning of death – his resurrection is the pledge and guarantee of the 'awakening' of those who believe in him.

Paul introduces his next teaching by saying that he speaks 'in the word of the Lord', or 'with the authority of the Lord'. There is no saying of Jesus in the gospels that is the direct equivalent of what Paul teaches. Is he perhaps then appealing to some unwritten word of Jesus that was circulating in the tradition? Maybe he is communicating something the Lord has revealed to him. Or perhaps we should take the expression to mean simply 'in keeping with the overall gospel message'.

Paul's teaching is that 'we who are alive, who survive until the coming of the Lord, shall not have precedence over those who have fallen asleep' (v 15). Because Paul says: 'we who are alive, who survive', some think Paul intends to include himself among those who will be living at the time of Christ's Parousia. If this were so, it would certainly prove he believed that Christ would return soon. As we have said, there are certainly indications throughout his letters that Paul hoped for the speedy return of Jesus, as did the Thessalonians and indeed all the early Christians (2 Thess 2 1-3).

But probably, Paul here is simply using a literary device, in which he assumes the point of view of those he is describing. Later in this same letter (5:10), he will say 'whether we are awake or asleep', a phrase which confesses his ignorance of the time of Christ's return. The fact that Paul uses the first person 'we' in 4:15 should not therefore be taken as an expression of his belief that he himself will be in that number. Paul is thinking rather of those believers who will be among the living when Christ comes again whenever that might be.

There follows a description of the return of Christ which draws on a form of writing that was popular among the Jews at the time, a literary form called 'apocalyptic'. It would be wrong to take this scenario as a blueprint of what will happen: it is not intended to be a literal description of events that will accompany Christ's return.

Paul says that the Lord will descend from heaven 'with a cry of command, with voice of archangel, and with trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who survive, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall ever be with the Lord' (vv 16-17). The commanding cry, the archangel's voice and the trumpet blast together emphasise the solemn and cosmic announcement of the final moment. The trumpet is a common Old Testament image to announce the day of the Lord and His triumph.

The faithful will go to meet the returning Lord. To encourage the Thessalonians, Paul says that not only will their dead be at no disadvantage: the 'dead in Christ', that is, those who have died in union with Christ, will actually be the first to respond to the heavenly summons. All the living and the resurrected will be taken up on the clouds. It is to be noted that the cloud is also a common biblical image or symbol for God's presence.

As well as borrowing his imagery from the Old Testament, Paul also has in mind the custom which was followed on the occasion of the visit to a city by an emperor or king in the ancient world. It is interesting that in Greek literature, the word used to describe this event was 'Parousia', the solemn arrival or appearance of the monarch – the same word as occurs in the New Testament to describe the second coming of Christ.

In the Hellenistic world which Paul knew so well, going out to meet the visiting emperor or king was part of the ceremonial. It was a recognition of his dignity, and a mark of honour extended to him. Another part of the ritual was the emperor's reward of those who had been faithful and loyal, and his passing of sentence on those who had not.

For this reason, some extend Paul's description to include also this element of Christ's parousia : the day of Christ's return will also be the day of judgment. It is true that elsewhere in Paul's letters (eg 2 Thess 1:7; 2 Cor 5:10), he does include the judgment in the programme, but it is not his concern at this point. His main aim is to comfort and console the Thessalonians 'and thus we shall ever be with the Lord'.

It was the common teaching of Jesus, and the early Church that the faithful would possess glory in the kingdom. Paul follows this line of thought in his letter, when he writes 'God is calling you into his kingdom and his glory' (1 Thess 2:2). In his later letters, we shall see how Paul connects the glory of Christians to its source, which is Christ (Phil 3:20; Rom 8:17-21). They are already organically united with him, and even now – he will teach – the Christian life is a growth in glory (2 Cor 3:18).

But for the moment, Paul is thinking on the final consummation, which he describes simply as being with Christ or living with him (5:10) forever. At this point, this is the essence of his message: 'We shall ever be with the Lord'. This encouraging and consoling teaching is to be shared (4:18). Paul's main purpose has not been to elaborate a point of doctrine, but to reassure his readers that the dead will share equally with the living in the joy of meeting Christ at his glorious return.

Next, he takes up the other question posed by the Thessalonian: 'When will this take place?' (5:1-10). This concern is found in the Bible going back centuries before Christ, and is still with us today. It is a particular preoccupation among the adventist sects of Christianity. The disciples of Jesus displayed the same curiosity (Matt 24:3; Luke 21:7; Acts 1:6). Jesus' answer to their queries was consistent: 'Of that day or hour no one knows ..., but the Father only' (Mark 13:32), and 'It is not for you to know the time ..., ' (Acts 1:7).

'The day of the Lord' is the traditional Old Testament phrase to describe the expected coming of God to rescue His faithful and judge His enemies. It was described as a day of wrath and punishment for the wicked, but one of salvation for the righteous. Paul in his letters retains this Old Testament teaching. Here (in 5:2), he

concentrates on its suddenness and unexpectedness – which is not the same thing as its imminence. It will come like a thief (Matt 24:43) in the night. The point is that Christ's coming will be so sudden, that its time cannot be predicted.

Paul no doubt thinking of the false prophets in time past, who preached peace and security when they should have been calling on people to repent, describes the period as one of great apathy and complacency. In the midst of the feverish activity of those absorbed in worldly pursuits (business and pleasure), destruction will come suddenly (5:3). Paul is here merely echoing the warnings contained in so many of the parables of Jesus himself. The 'pangs of childbirth' is another frequent metaphor used by the prophets, to stress the sudden onset of suffering.

But whereas unbelievers are in the darkness, and therefore subject to surprise, Christians are not (v. 4). Darkness is an ancient biblical symbol, with many shades of meaning: death, disaster, or simply evil. Here Paul seems to mean infidelity, and the blindness that is within. Deuteronomy 28:29 speaks of those unfaithful to Yahweh who grope about even in the midday sun.

Christians, however – says Paul – are destined for the light of day. In contrast to darkness, light stands for life and for God's grace. For Paul, the difference between believers and unbelievers is not one of degree, but of kind, of nature – like the difference between day and night. The Christian is already part of that new world which will be fully revealed on the 'day of the Lord'.

Unlike the pagan, he welcomes Christ's return as something for which he was made, as a fish seeks water or a person trapped below ground seeks light and air.

Christians must however be vigilant and on the alert, not for fear of Christ's return, because they are 'of the day'. For them, the Parousia will not be an ambush, but the consummation of what they already are. So, made for the day and eagerly awaiting it, they should live and act accordingly. Sleep and drunkenness are characteristic of the night, and symbolize the stupor of those who live unaware of the coming judgment. The Christian's

responsibility is to be constantly on his toes, living in God's grace, doing good works, and looking forward to the coming of Christ.

This picture of being on full-time alert suggests to Paul the further image of military preparedness. He describes the soldiers' armour of his day: the breastplate, to symbolize faith and love; and the helmet, which is the hope of salvation (v 8). He borrows this imagery from Isaiah 59:17. Faith, hope and love are the essential equipment of the soldier of Christ. Note how hope again occurs in the place of honour, as in 1:3. Hope is the main theme of this letter, hope in God's final salvation, which is in complete contrast to the coming 'wrath' of God (v 9). As we shall see, 'salvation' in Paul's writings is used in different senses – sometimes as a past event, sometimes as a present experience. In this letter, however, salvation is a future hope.

The way Paul establishes the motivation for living a Christian life is striking. We must live in a state of preparedness, because God has destined us not for his wrath but for salvation. A moralizing preacher might be tempted to say we must be on the alert, because we have to work out our salvation. Instead, Paul says, our salvation is God's work. But, instead of causing us to be complacent in the knowledge that we are saved, Paul regards our divine destiny as something that demands our constant diligence and our best efforts. This salvation, to which we are destined, has been won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ (v 10), especially by his saving death.

Paul does not at this point develop a theology of Christ's death, as he will do later in Galatians and Romans. Here he is content to say that the purpose of Christ's death was that we might find life together with him, that is, that we might share in the risen life which he now enjoys. This is the destiny of the faithful Christian whether he be awake (living) or asleep (dead) when the Lord returns.

The aim of Paul's whole instruction has been to strengthen and build up the community. He ends his teaching with a compliment to the Thessalonians, 'as you are doing', indicating his satisfaction at the overall healthy state of the Thessalonian Church, based on Timothy's

favourable report to him in Corinth

2 Thessalonians

Some commentators have questioned the authenticity of this second letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, preferring to see it as a later imitation by an unknown author, who borrowed words and phrases from Paul's first letter to give it an air of genuineness. But there seems no reason to accept this minority viewpoint. One of the reasons put forward by those of this opinion, is that, whereas Paul in the first letter discouraged all speculation about the time of the Lord's return, the second letter lists a number of conditions that must be fulfilled before Christ will come again.

As we have seen, Paul's first letter answered the question about the situation at Christ's return on those who had already died. He urged the Thessalonians not to be worried about the time or date of the event, but to live in readiness, as befits those who belong to 'the light' and 'the day'.

Apparently some within the community had concluded that the day had already arrived. They were appealing to some letter or sermon of Paul to back up this teaching. From this they had drawn a practical conclusion: to down tools and stop work. This false interpretation of his teaching about the Parousia, and the idleness which it provoked, caused Paul to write a second letter to them not long after the first, probably around the middle of the year 51 CE.

The section of the letter we shall consider (2 Thess 2:1-12) is a famous Pauline passage, and one that has caused a lot of problems to commentators on St. Paul. As we said in our last session, Paul ardently desired that the 'day of the Lord' would come soon. This eager hope and expectation seems to have led the Thessalonians to believe that its arrival was imminent.

The other problem about this passage is its literary form, which was a popular and common form of religious writing and expression at the time called 'apocalyptic'. Apocalyptic was a highly dramatic and imaginative kind of writing, full of images and symbols. It saw the world scene in terms of black and white, with good and evil in open conflict with each other. The end would be preceded by a cosmic

struggle between God and the powers of evil, with God and the forces of good emerging triumphant. All the scholars agree that in interpreting this form of literature, we have to look beyond the obscure symbolism, not press the literal truth of the details too much, and look for the essential message. The difficulty is in knowing where to draw the line, and how to decide what the writer intended to be taken literally and what was just part of the dramatic scenery.

Paul begins the section with a renewed appeal to the Thessalonians not to be anxious about the Parousia or second coming of Christ and their 'assembling to meet him' (v 1). The Jews understood God's final saving act as an occasion when He would 'gather together the assembly of His people'. Isaiah 27:13 says 'On that day, a great trumpet will blow, and the lost in the land of Assyria and the outcasts in the land of Egypt shall come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain, in Jerusalem'.

Paul appeals to them not to 'be quickly shaken or excited', agitated about the end of the world or its accompanying circumstances. He identifies the sources of their anxiety as 'by spirit, or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us'. It is not quite clear what he has in mind here. The trouble in the community seems to have been caused by an erroneous appeal to Paul's authority. Perhaps a forged letter was being circulated, containing false teaching, for Paul does express a fear of such letters in 3:17. But one would expect him to have condemned such a false letter more explicitly. Perhaps therefore he is referring to the fact that his first letter to them was being misinterpreted.

The 'word' to which he refers could be a sermon of his while he was among them, now being quoted out of context. The 'spirit' no doubt refers to some alleged revelation of the Spirit to the Church at Thessalonica. We know from 1Thess 5:19-21, that the Spirit was active among the community, and that many were claiming and exercising the gift of prophecy. Paul may therefore be referring to some teaching by one claiming to be a prophet and misrepresenting Paul's thought.

Whatever be the source of the error, Paul insists that the 'day of the Lord' has not arrived. This

misunderstanding has led some of the Thessalonians to quit work and lead a life of idleness (3:6-15). Such is not the case, because there are two important signs which must precede the 'day of the Lord'. The first is 'the rebellion' or the apostasy (v 3). In the Bible, the Greek word 'apostasia' is a technical term for religious defection, a rebellion against God or against His law. In Jewish religious literature from about the time of Jesus, it came to mean a defection from the faith that would take place in the last days (see 1 Tim 4:1).

In the context of this rebellion or apostasy, Paul says that a figure will appear whom he calls 'the man of lawlessness', 'the son of perdition'. Later, in v. 8, he will be called 'the lawless one' or the wicked one. This man of lawlessness or iniquity is the one who will lead the rebellion against God. He is also described by Paul as the one 'who opposes' (v 4). This term opponent or opposer is a biblical description for Satan, the adversary of God (Zech 3:1; 1 Tim 5:14). If Paul does not intend a direct reference to Satan here, at least he presents the man of lawlessness as Satan's instrument.

He will be the incarnation of pride, for he will 'exalt himself' and 'take his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God'. This description of blasphemous self-exaltation is clearly borrowed from Daniel 11:37, which describes how in the second century before Christ the Greek king Antiochus IV desecrated the temple treasury and set up an image of a pagan god in the Holy of Holies. The bible refers to this idol as 'the abomination of desolation'. About Antiochus, Daniel says: 'He shall exalt himself and make himself greater than every god and he shall utter blasphemies against the God of gods'.

The book of Daniel served as a model for all subsequent apocalyptic writing, and the description of the activities of Antiochus came to be used as typical of the outbreak of evil and godlessness in the last days.

In Christian tradition, this man of lawlessness has come to be known as the Anti-Christ, and the temple is often interpreted as standing for the Church. Who did Paul have in mind? Was he thinking of any individual person, or a collective group, or both? Did

he see the evil activity of this figure as already at work or as something only in the future?

He tells the Thessalonians in v 6 that they should know from Paul's preaching among them what was restraining the man of wickedness, so that he would be unmasked only in God's good time. Paul speaks of this restraining force as a person in the following verse: 'he who now restrains it' (v 7). Who or what is this person or power who acts as a restraining force on the man and activity of lawlessness?

Clearly 'the mystery (or secret activity) of lawlessness has already been set in motion' (v 7). The forces of evil are already at work, but the man of iniquity has not yet made his appearance because of some obstacle (person or thing) which God has placed in his way. No indication is given as to who or what this obstacle or restraining power is.

The same uncertainty surrounds the identity of the 'Man of lawlessness'. Paul seems to suggest he is a historical person. But we should be careful not to make the concept of the Antichrist too exclusive. Even in the New Testament, the figure is interpreted differently. In 1 John, it refers to a group of heretics, whereas in the book of Revelation, it refers to hostile political and religious forces. If Paul had any individual person in mind, we have no way of identifying him. But it is doubtful whether he did. Deliberate and calculated obscurity are a feature of apocalyptic writing.

When the obstacle has been removed, the lawless one will be revealed (v 8), but his moment of glory will be short-lived. In words recalling Isaiah 11:4, Paul says that the Lord Jesus will in turn appear and easily overcome him.

In v 9, Paul describes the appearance of the man of lawlessness, using language which is typical of apocalyptic writing. Special emphasis is placed on falsehood and deception: pretended signs and wonders, deception for those who are to perish. Those who will be seduced and led astray are those who have 'refused to love the truth' (v 10). This phrase stresses that those who perish will bear the responsibility for their own ruin. Their punishment will be self-inflicted, because of their refusal to love the truth, that is, the gospel, the

good news of salvation.

This refusal to love Christ and his message, its deliberate and culpable rejection, will carry with it its own punishment: 'God sends on them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false'. This choice of words might make it seem that God is responsible for their being deceived. But we must remember that the Hebrews did not distinguish between the positive will of God and his permissive will.

The context makes it clear that their punishment is the result of their own decision. They have refused to love the truth (v 10) they did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (v 12).

Paul then draws a strong contrast between the fate of those who choose to be led astray, and the destiny of those who believe in the truth (v 13). The lot of the latter is to 'obtain the glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ' (v 14). He expresses this in a prayer of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, and concludes by urging them to stand firm and hold to the traditions which they have been taught (v 15).

From this teaching with all its obscurity, we may retain at least that Paul expected, before the end of time, the coming of a person (possibly) or a movement which would be anti-God and anti-Christ. Satan meantime pursues his action in secret. The Church must hold itself in hope and vigilance. Whatever be the power of the enemy, the Church must share Paul's certitude that she will emerge victorious.

For Christians, expectations of Christ's Parousia should not be a source of fear, but rather of joy and enthusiasm and hope for the happy event which will crown their labours in Christ.

7. Paul writes to the church of Philippi

Acts, Chapter 18, gives a reliable, detailed account of Paul's missionary work in the city of Corinth, and provides us with important information about the beginnings of the church there. But it is Paul's own correspondence with the Corinthian Church, written from Ephesus some years afterwards, which is our most valuable source of information. His letters to the Corinthians reflect an exciting, and sometimes stormy, history of his experiences with this community. Acts does not enlighten us on the particular problems which Paul later had to contend with. Because Paul's ministry there is so closely associated with the contents of the letters he later wrote to them, we shall leave it until later to describe the city of Corinth and its inhabitants.

As we have seen, Paul came to Corinth from Athens during the second missionary journey, discouraged by his failure at Athens to win over the Greeks to Christ. He found work in a tent-making establishment belonging to a Jew named Aquila, and stayed at his home. Aquila and his wife Priscilla must have been Christians already before they were forced to leave Rome by a decree of the emperor Claudius expelling the Jews from that city (Acts 18: 1-3). References in 1Cor 16:19 and Romans 16:4 show how much this couple's faith, their care for the church, and their spirit of self-sacrifice must have meant for Paul and the infant churches, both in Corinth and also in Ephesus, to which they later moved. Even so, Paul's depression must have lasted some time, until he received a reassuring vision, reported by Acts, in which Christ told him, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city' (Acts 18:9-10).

In fact, Paul's ministry in Corinth of more than 'a year and six months' (18:11) – the years 51-52 CE – must have been a most fruitful one, spreading to other parts of the province, for 2Cor is addressed to 'the saints who are in the whole of Achaia', as well as to the church of Corinth itself (2Cor 1:1).

During Paul's stay there a man named Gallio became proconsul of Achaia (18:12) and the Jews made a determined effort to have Paul condemned. But Gallio refused to enter into what he considered to be a religious quarrel among Jews (vv 14-16). After 'many days' (v 18), Paul departed from Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla and sailed for Ephesus. After a brief stay he left them there and journeyed to Caesarea, from where he went up to Jerusalem (v 22) before returning to his base in Antioch.

The third great missionary journey began in 53 or 54 CE. Again Paul travelled overland, through Galatia and Phrygia, 'strengthening all the disciples' whom he had left in those regions on his previous campaigns (v 23). He eventually returned to Ephesus (19:1) which was to be his missionary headquarters for nearly three years (19:8, 10; 20:31). Acts does not really give a coherent and orderly record of his ministry in and around Ephesus. The sources which Luke had at his disposal for this period of Paul's life were apparently scanty and of uneven value. His account relies a lot on anecdotes and popular stories, and some critics are openly sceptical about the historical value of these reports because of their alleged legendary features. Nevertheless, Luke does skilfully capture the atmosphere of Ephesus, and there is no doubt that valuable historical information is included in his account.

In this category is what he tells us about a brilliant Jewish convert from Alexandria named Apollos, 'an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures ... and fervent in spirit' (Acts 18 24-25). He had come to Ephesus since Paul's earlier brief visit and began to preach the Christian message in the synagogue. Aquila and Priscilla, realising his potential but also aware that his instruction in the faith had been very rudimentary, took it upon themselves to complete his catechetical formation. The Christian community of Ephesus then sent him with a strong recommendation to Corinth where he was of great service because of his eloquence and knowledge of the Scriptures. This

information about Apollos is of great importance as background for understanding part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, as we shall see.

Acts tells us that after a few months of limited success among the Jews of Ephesus (19:8f), Paul turned his attention to the Gentiles, thus following an already well established pattern of missionary strategy. His power to work miracles is emphasised (vv 11-20), and there is a vivid description of the riot instigated by the silversmith Demetrius (vv 22-41).

Ephesus marked a real highlight in Paul's missionary career. It was also a productive period as far as his literary output is concerned, because it was from Ephesus that he wrote 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and almost certainly Philippians. At various points these letters bear directly or indirectly on Ephesus and his work there, and it is true that the picture which emerges contains many details about which Acts gives us little or no information.

The letters reveal that Paul's success at Ephesus went hand in hand with great dangers and persecutions. In 1Cor 15:32, he refers to a 'combat with wild beasts', a figure of speech for the ferocity of the persecution to which he was subjected. He speaks of having been 'so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself' (2Cor 1:8), and in the serious danger of death (2Cor 1 9f; 23, 26). Acts is completely silent about these afflictions; also it does not make any mention of Paul being imprisoned while at Ephesus.

The order of Paul's correspondence from Ephesus is not clear. Many scholars date the composition of his letter to the Galatians shortly after his arrival at Ephesus about 54 CE. This is probably correct, but because of its similarity in subject matter to Romans, we shall delay a detailed treatment of this letter until later. Paul's first canonical letter to the Corinthians is generally dated towards the end of his stay at Ephesus (57 CE.), and Philippians was probably written about the same time, perhaps just before 1 Corinthians.

The letter to the Philippians is commonly grouped with Colossians and Ephesians to form the 'captivity letters'. Certainly it was written

from prison, and commentators in the past assumed that all three were written by Paul during his later imprisonment in Rome in the early 60's. But it is now commonly accepted that the letter to the Philippians was written from Ephesus. The letter presupposes numerous contacts between Paul the prisoner and the people of Philippi, and this would be difficult to explain if he were writing from faraway Rome, whereas Philippi was only a week's journey from Ephesus.

Philippians is a valuable witness to the growth and vitality of the Church in Ephesus. Paul's arrest and imprisonment by no means reduced it to fearful silence, but rather it became even bolder in its witness. In 1:14-17, he complains of a lack of sincerity in some cases, though he could vouch for the sincerity of the majority of the church members who remain attached to him. They were conscious of what was demanded of them, even more so in view of his own imprisonment and his suffering for the sake of the gospel. They stepped into the breach, so that just at the time Paul was personally restricted, the gospel was unexpectedly advanced (1:12 ff). At the same time, he has no illusions that some of them through hostility, envy and malice toward himself, took advantage of the opportunity to depress him by letting him see how nicely things were going along without him. The exact nature of their activities is not known. There is no suggestion that any false teaching is involved; it seems to be rather a question of personal jealousy and antagonism. For Paul can at last express his satisfaction that, whatever their motives, 'Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice' (1:18).

Luke in Acts tells us something of the Jewish opposition encountered by Paul at Ephesus (19:8-10). It was probably in the course of this conflict with the Jews that he suffered more than once the synagogue punishment of 39 lashes mentioned in 2Cor 11:24. In this same letter (2 Cor) written just after his departure from Ephesus, he lists this among many other sufferings and setbacks endured during the course of his apostolic work. Of all these persecutions, Acts to this stage has mentioned only one imprisonment at Philippi and makes no mention at all of trouble in Ephesus. While we

cannot know for certain how many of the sufferings and dangers, some of them almost fatal, which are mentioned in 2Cor 11:22-23, occurred during his stay of several years at Ephesus, it must have been the scene of many of them.

Certainly it is an appalling catalogue of suffering. There were also clashes with the Roman authorities, for when Paul wrote he was in the custody of the Praetorian guard stationed in the palace of the Roman governor, due to make his defence and have sentence passed on him (1:13). It could not have been very strict custody, for he could receive regular news of the church at Philippi, was allowed to receive visitors and gifts, to send fellow workers, and, obviously, to write letters (Phil 1:12 ff; 2:19 ff).

However, Paul was evidently in great danger. He says himself (1:22 ff) that there was no certainty about the outcome of his trial – an acquittal or a death sentence, were equal possibilities. His remarks in 2Cor 1:8 ff refer to the same situation, in which he thanks God for delivering him from a deadly peril. He apparently left Ephesus soon after his imprisonment, but probably in rather different circumstances than what Acts would lead us to believe.

We have seen how Paul had established his first church on the continent of Europe at Philippi during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:11-40). There is little information to be gained from Acts about the community, but Paul's letters suggest that it was a stable and fervent one. Certainly it was a church which was very devoted to Paul. Although quite poor (2Cor 8:2), they sent him aid at Thessalonica (Phil 4:16) and again at Corinth (2Cor 11:9). They were the first to respond generously to his collection for the Jerusalem church. How, hearing of his imprisonment, they rise to the occasion again, sending aid to him through Epaphroditus (4:18), apparently one of the leaders of the community there. This draws from Paul a warm and affectionate response. Philippians is the most personal of all Paul's letters, which gives it, added interest. There is no controversy, no abuses or problems to correct, no dogmatic issues at stake: it simply reveals his innermost thoughts at this point in his ministry.

After the opening address, greeting and introductory thanksgiving and prayer (1:1-11), Paul vividly describes his personal situation (1:20-26). He urges the Philippians to struggle together for the faith (1:27-30), and also to strive for unity and the common good after the example of Christ whose 'emptying' is the formula for true greatness (2:1-11). It is this fast passage, so rich and beautiful in ideas and expression that we will consider in some detail.

Paul's appeal for family love and unity is based first on the Philippians' own cherished values (vv 1-4). The four introductory 'if' clauses lead up to Paul's exhortation to complete harmony, 'being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind' (v 2). There is no reason to think that any rebuke is contained in these conditional clauses, as though Paul is implying that they are seriously lacking in the virtues he mentions. Rather he makes his appeal for total unity and harmony, confident in the knowledge that the Philippians already display to a great extent the qualities in question.

Possibly, however, his request to 'complete my joy by being of one mind' reflects a knowledge of some elements of division in the community – not a matter of false teaching, but perhaps of rivalry and competition, petty jealousies, or simply differences of opinion or temperament.

And so he counsels them to humility, selflessness and concern for others as a remedy. 'Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus' (v 5), for this is precisely the example which he has left us. Paul is exhorting the Philippians to an imitation of Christ, whose humility and self-sacrifice would be the model for the conduct that should be found in their community.

Into this context, Paul skilfully inserts a new section (vv 6-11) which blends well with what he has just said, carefully structured into six verses. The whole composition reflects a most artistic arrangement. In its theme, it recalls Isaiah Chapter 53 which describes the voluntary humiliation of the servant of Yahweh, followed by his vindication by God. Paul apparently did not compose the hymn himself because many of the words and phrases are not his normal style. It is thought that the hymn is an early Jewish-

Christian liturgical composition, probably originating in a Palestinian Christian community.

The structure of this hymn in honour of Christ in six verses may be represented thus:

1. Who, though he was in the form of God did not count as a thing to be grasped his equality with God (v 6)
2. But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men (v 7)
3. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death even death on a cross – (a phrase added by Paul) (v 8)
4. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name (v 9)
5. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (v 10)
6. And every tongue confess to the glory of God the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord! (v 11)

By his use of this early Church confession of faith in the form of a hymn, Paul proposes to the Philippians the historical Jesus who enjoyed also a divine 'form' prior to his becoming man. This must be understood to mean that he enjoyed divine status or glory before his human and earthly existence. But he did not consider this 'a thing to be grasped', and clung to. Jesus did not consider the status of divine glory a privilege or possession to be hoarded or clutched tenaciously to himself. His 'equality with God' is simply another way of expressing his being 'in the form of God'. Along with John 5:18, we have here one of the strongest statements of the divinity of Jesus in the New Testament. Although Jesus possessed equality with God and consequently the right to appear like Yahweh in glory, he did not stand on his dignity.

Instead, 'he emptied himself'. By becoming man, Jesus divested himself of the privilege of divine glory. He did not set aside his divinity as such, but rather the status of glory to which he had a right and which would be restored at his exaltation (cf. Jn 17:5). His voluntary surrender of the divine glory is the humiliation of the Incarnation.

On emptying himself, Jesus took the form of a slave. To say that Christ was in the form of God means that he possessed the 'nature' of God, as shown by the use of the expression 'equality with God'. So here, the 'form of a slave' must mean more than mere appearance, which would imply an unacceptable view of the Incarnation. For the condition of slavery denotes the humanity of Jesus in contrast to his condition of Lordship to which he is to be raised (v 11). He who made himself a slave would eventually become the 'Lord'. The use of the word 'slave' is probably intended as a reference to the 'Servant of Yahweh' (Isaiah 52:13). But whether such a reference is intended at this particular point or not, there is no doubt that the Servant idea underlies the whole hymn. The word 'slave' implies the idea of humiliation and suffering which Second Isaiah had prophesied of the Servant of Yahweh – with whom the gospels explicitly identify Jesus (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34, 45).

Being born in the likeness of men: Not only did he become a real man, but he became like all other men, without exceptional privileges. This real solidarity with other men is what is stressed in Hebrews 2:17.

And being found in human form: lit: 'In outward appearance found as a man'. The Greek word used here describes something more external and superficial than 'form'. Paul is pursuing the idea of Christ's identity with other men even as far as the ordinary external appearance of humanity.

He humbled himself: This is the second stage of Jesus' humiliation. If there was already an emptying involved in the taking on of a human nature, there is a further humiliation in accepting pain, suffering, and death. This stage sums up his whole life on earth and devotion to his Father which comes to a climax in his death on a cross.

And became obedient... The most characteristic virtue of a servant is obedience and here it is Christ's obedience to God which is extolled. His passion and death was essentially an act of obedience, repairing for the human race what was lost through the disobedience of the first man (Rom 5:19). This was not ordinary obedience, but heroic. There is no mention of the redemptive value of his death here, as there is in Rom 5:19, because Paul is concentrating on Christ's personal humiliation.

The lowest depth of this humiliation is indicated in the phrase, 'even death on a cross'. Of all deaths this was the most shameful, both in the Hebrew view (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13), and in Roman eyes, because it was the type of capital punishment meted out, precisely, to slaves. The phrase was apparently added by Paul to the primitive hymn to express the point farthest removed from Jesus' heavenly and glorious status. From this depth the upward movement of the hymn now suddenly begins. The sudden reversal is also seen in the fact that whereas Christ has been the subject of all the preceding emptying and humiliation, God now becomes the subject and Christ becomes the object of God's action upon him: exaltation and conferring of the name 'Lord'. The emphasis of the initial '*therefore*' (v 9) relates God's exaltation of him directly to his own self-humiliation.

The Greek verb used is in the intensive form: God has '*super-exalted*' him, raised him to the loftiest heights. The reference is directly to the ascension of Christ (cf. Eph 4:10) – though resurrection is of course implied. Some commentators suggest that the intensive form of the verb may indicate that Christ has now been given more than he possessed in the beginning, for he now has a glorified humanity as well. But it is probably meant to convey the very Pauline idea that God's reward always surpasses in glory what man has endured in suffering (Rom 5:15, 20; 8:18). The Father has exalted Christ to a status which contrasts superabundantly with his condition of abasement.

The conferring of a name meant much more in Hebrew and early Christian thought than the modern naming or christening. It denoted an identity and was often almost synonymous with

'person'. Here the name bestowed by God as a reward is the name which is 'above every (other) name', the name 'Lord' which occurs at the end of the hymn (v 11). This word was used in the Greek Old Testament as the translation and equivalent of the sacred name of Yahweh, Israel's God: hence the superiority of this name above those of all heavenly beings (Eph 1:21; cf. Heb 1:4). Christ thus enters into divine honours, not in the sense that he became God through his resurrection and ascension, but because now, in his humanity which obeyed and suffered, he is established in that glory which was his by *right* in virtue of his pre-existence, and is now his by *reward* in virtue of his sacrifice.

An even clearer statement of the divinity of Christ occurs in the fifth verse (v 10) where it is said 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow'. This is an act of religious devotion. The words of the hymn at this point refer to Isaiah 45:23 which describe the adoration due to God alone. Though later theology will develop and make precise the relationship of equality between Father and Son, the attribution to Jesus of the divine name (and identity) is the clearest possible statement of the divinity of Christ in the full sense of the term.

Moreover, it is a universal and cosmic adoration which is given. The threefold enumeration of beings 'in heaven and on earth and under the earth' is a device to express the universality of Christ's Lordship. The categories designated are in fact the angels of the spirit world (Col 1:16-20; 2:15), living men and creatures, and the dead in Sheol or Hades.

The acclamation 'Jesus Christ is Lord' is the essential profession of the early Christian faith in Jesus and forms the climax of the hymn. The same profession is found echoed in 1Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9 (cf. Col 2:6). Standing in sharp contrast to the status of servant (v 7), it refers to the state of glory which Christ now enjoys as a result of being raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father. It proclaims a cosmic authority over all creation (cf. Rom 14:9).

To the glory of God the Father: The exaltation and glorification of Jesus has as its effect the glorification of the Father. Jesus' occupation of

the heavenly throne constitutes no rivalry to the Father, to Yahweh Himself. Rather, the acknowledgment paid to him by the whole of creation in his rewarded status brings honour to the Father.

It is interesting to compare Paul's thought with that of John as expressed, for example, in John 17:1-5. John, too, looks forward to a future glorification of Jesus, which he sees anticipated in the crucifixion (3:14; 8:28; 12:42), but he sees the earthly life of Jesus as already a revelation of God's glory in the flesh (1:14; 2:11; 12:23-24, 28; 18:6). The Father is glorified in the earthly life of Jesus. Paul, on the other hand, conceives the earthly life of Jesus as an emptying, a humiliation, a sacrificing of the divine glory which was his by right, and a fulfilment of the role of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in its most humiliating aspects. The outbreak of the divine glory appears only at the resurrection-ascension of Jesus, which is itself a pledge of the Parousia when all creation will be compelled to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, a status which he enjoys even now in his glorified humanity.

The ancient hymn which Paul thus skilfully weaves into his exhortation to the Philippians represents a profound theology of the Incarnation. Without ceasing to be divine, the Son surrenders that external glory which is his by right to take on the form of a servant, becoming like men in all things.

He went still further, submitting to humiliation and becoming obedient even to death, and indeed the ultimate ignominy of crucifixion. The Father has rewarded this abasement by raising him from the dead and exalting him in his humanity to a status which is properly divine and worthy of that adoration of the whole of creation which is due to God alone.

In all of this Christ becomes an example to the Philippians (and to all Christians) that the way to glory is through the emptying of self for a life of service and self-sacrifice (vv 3-5).

8. An outline of the Christian way of life

In Philippians 3:2-4, 9, we have a self-contained section which has no close connection with what goes before. It begins abruptly with a warning against Jewish-Christian extremists who seem to be working in the area of Philippi.

The whole section represents a call by Paul to the Philippians to follow his example on the path of Christian salvation. In an otherwise calm and affectionate letter, v 2 is surprising. He used a very harsh expression in reference to circumcision, and goes on to boast that if there were any reason for confidence in circumcision as a pledge of salvation, he is at least as well credentialed as any other Jewish Christian.

In v 6 he refers to his former 'righteousness', that state of blamelessness which the Pharisees, and Paul before his conversion, thought came only from a scrupulous observance of the Law and all the legal traditions with which it was embroidered (Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-54). In this, Paul says, he was an irreproachable model. He had considered it a 'gain', (v 7), a great blessing for him, until he encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus (v 8). Now he sees it as loss, – indeed 'everything', i.e. all human values apart from Christ, – not because they are evil in themselves, but because they cannot compare with 'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (v 8).

Paul is here appealing to his own experience of Christ. But his purpose is to propose his own experience as an example of what every Christian life ought to be (v 17). 'For the sake of Christ' (v 7), in order to 'know' him as intimately as possible, Paul has willingly 'suffered the loss of all things' and counted them as 'refuse' (the Greek word literally describes what is thrown to dogs, scraps left-over, garbage).

When he says, 'that I may be found in him' (v 9), is Paul thinking of what he has already gained in Christ, in comparison with what he had rejected? Or is he looking to the future and his perfect possession of Christ and by Christ at the Parousia?

The two senses are not necessarily exclusive. In the context, Paul seems to have in mind both the

future ('goal', 'prize' – v 14) and the present ('faith in Christ', v 9; 'sharing his sufferings', v 10). The expression, 'in him', sums up the essence of the Christian life, which Paul goes on to describe in terms of 'righteousness', a theme which he will develop at length in Galatians and Romans. Here we have a first sketch, but a precious one – and for the moment we shall simply point out the features which are mentioned here:

- (1) it is not 'righteousness of my own' (v 9), as though it were something earned by me or due to me, like a salary paid for work done;
- (2) nor is it 'based on law'. A much fuller treatment of this appears in Gal 3:21f; Rom 3:21f; Rom 10:3 – where any attempt to attain righteousness through the Law is seen as the same as one's efforts to establish one's own righteousness;
- (3) it comes *through faith* in Christ. Man's faith response to Christ is here presented as the cause of righteousness;
- (4) it is a righteousness from God – not a salary or a reward, but a *gift*. It is freely given by God to man, and reconciles him from being a sinner to becoming a friend of God. It remains a gift, and so even the person who has been made righteous or justified has no grounds for boasting, except about God's goodness to him;
- (5) it depends *on faith* – (a slight advance over No. 3). To say that it comes through faith means that faith is the door through which God's righteousness is given to man in the first place. But faith also remains the necessary foundation on which the on-going life of righteousness rests. It is not just a matter of initial faith but of lasting faith;
- (6) three effects follow from it:
 - a) knowledge of Christ. It is not just the initial knowledge of Christ, which comes with conversion, to which Paul aspires, but a deepening of it (as in Eph 3:19). He desires to grow in the knowledge of Christ

- which is rooted in faith, and to forge an ever closer personal relationship with him;
- b) an experience of the power of Christ's resurrection (v 10). Christ's resurrection is seen by Paul not as a past event but as a power which acts as a vital force in his day to day existence as a Christian. We see here a definite advance on his thinking in Thessalonians. There the Resurrection was mentioned only as a pledge or guarantee of Christ's return and final triumph (1 Thes 1:0; 4:14), but here Paul speaks of its present transforming power – being united with Christ means being under the constant influence of his glorified humanity. In this idea we have the seeds of the doctrine Paul will develop in his later letters of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ;
- c) a share in Christ's sufferings. The Greek word which Paul uses here is a very profound and powerful one. It means sharing, fellowship Communion, with the communal sense of sharing with others. Paul's previous ministry and his present imprisonment have taught him this in a very real and practical way. His conversion on the road to Damascus involved seeing the risen Lord. He has since learned how much he must suffer for him and with him. He has come to understand the full meaning of that experience, and now knows that union with Christ involves an identification with him even in suffering – and this is even something to be desired! In 1Cor 15:31 Paul will say that he dies daily. The word he uses here means growing into the likeness of the suffering Christ, and he expresses his eagerness to do this, because he sees it as a necessary condition for sharing fully in Christ's life (v 11).

In Col 1:24, Paul will say that his great motive for desiring to share the sufferings of Christ lies in the good this will bring to the Church; but here he is thinking only of his own personal situation and goal – though, implicitly, he is using his own example and experience to teach his readers what their attitude ought to be.

Paul is very much aware that he has not yet arrived and still has a way to go (v 12). 'I press on to make it my own', he says. Though not expressed, from

what has gone before it is clear that the goal is that of perfect knowledge of, or union with, Christ. In both verses 12 and 14, he speaks of 'pressing on'. The Greek verb literally means 'to pursue', and for Paul the spiritual life is a pursuit. The image of a pursuit or a chase stresses both the desirability of the goal or prize and its elusiveness – the desire for it and the anxiety of not yet possessing it, combine to spur him on. The words he uses are a salutary warning against complacency in the spiritual life, or readiness to settle for mediocrity.

He presses on to make it his own. These expressions were often found in combination in military writings to describe the pursuit of escaped prisoners and the determination to seize or capture them. Here, as we have said, they describe the pursuit of an ideal with the aim of perfect attainment. This imagery, along with the lingering force of 'to know' him (v 10) shows that the seizure or capture which Paul is thinking of is the perfect knowledge of Christ – seeing him face to face.

He sees his own striving as a kind of repayment of a sacred debt – 'because Christ Jesus has made me his own', or seized me (the same word). This is a reference to his conversion and call. It is interesting to note also that the Greek word which means 'to pursue' can also mean 'to persecute'. Paul may well be playing on the double meaning of the word. At the time of his conversion he was a persecutor of the church, pursuing it with a view to destroying it. And in fact in all three accounts of his conversion in Acts (Chs9, 22, 26), Luke reports Christ as saying 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'. Paul's conversion meant the end of his persecution but not of his pursuit – in fact, only the beginning of a different kind of pursuit. Having been seized or captured by Christ, he was inspired to pursue and seize or capture him, to possess him completely.

In v 12, Paul rejects any sense of satisfaction with his attainment thus far and affirms his strenuous pursuit of the ideal, which he substantially repeats in vv 13-14, but even more vigorously. He probably fears an excessive self-satisfaction or self-estimation on the part of the Philippians, and gently warns them by appealing to his own example. Single minded, Paul forgets what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead. The 'past' does not refer to his life before his conversion. What he means is that he does not want to linger on the progress he has already made as a Christian,

because this might lead to an attitude of self-sufficiency – again a gentle reminder to the Philippians of the need to ‘try harder’. Paul’s whole striving is towards what lies before him. The ‘straining forward’ is taken from the imagery of athletics. Like a runner in a race, Paul strains every nerve and muscle for greater knowledge of Christ and union with him, with his sights set ultimately on the Parousia.

In 1Cor 9:24-27, the prize is the crown of righteousness, and in Rom 8:17, it is a share in the glory of the risen Lord. The idea of ‘reward’ is present, but it is a reward which God freely gives. The prize is included and offered in the very act of God’s call, a kind of inbuilt reward, and ultimately not the result of Paul’s own labours. The call is ‘upward’, i.e., heavenward, stressing the final goal of the whole movement.

The whole metaphor evokes a series of necessary virtues: strength, perseverance, generosity, wholeheartedness, endurance – but the main point is that, just as the desire to win rules out any reliance on the course already covered, so the Christian is not to linger on past accomplishments or present virtues, but must hunger for perfect union with Christ. This hunger should grow more intense as the race progresses.

Paul’s example has been an implicit sermon of exhortation (v 15) lest they have missed the point; he now invites them to join him in the same pursuit. He presumes that many of them are already well advanced along the road, for he refers to them as ‘mature’. This denotes a state of spiritual maturity or spiritual adulthood. Its counterpart is ‘infant’ which is applied by Paul elsewhere (see Eph 4:13-14) to those Christians taking their first faltering steps in their new life, still capable only of assimilating elementary doctrine, not the solid food of which ‘spiritual’ people are capable, cf. 1Cor 3:1. The ‘mature’ have not merely received the Spirit but live according to the Spirit (Gal 5:25), are moved by the Spirit (Rom 8:14). They show their maturity by standing firm against false teachings (Eph 4:14) and by striving for ever more progress (Phil 4:15). ‘Mature’ is a word which challenges one to greater effort but at the same time conveys a confidence in one’s capacity to attain the desired goal. It is as though Paul is saying: ‘If then we are spiritually mature, let us show it by striving for ever greater progress’.

‘And’, Paul adds in the latter part of v 15, ‘if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you’. He has just proposed to them an ideal of progress; continual progress – an ideal so high that some may think it beyond their capacity – or perhaps he means that the sublime ideal which he has put before them has opened up new avenues or possibilities still beyond their grasp. If so, God himself will clarify Paul’s teaching for them.

He concludes his exhortation with the words, ‘Only let us hold true to what we have attained’. Paul, having held up to them the ideal of continuous progress and having realised that all the implications of this may not yet be fully understood, now says that at least, in any case, they should hold on to the progress they have made and to the direction of their course, and not slide back or change course. Don’t change your tactics!

No other passage in Paul’s letters deals so vividly or so vigorously with the progressive character of the Christian life. He has been concentrating on salvation as a present experience, but based on salvation as a past event (v 10: the power of his resurrection) and with hope in salvation as a future reality (v 14).

In v 19, Paul condemns a way of life and manner of conduct which is in sharp contrast to the Christian’s life. The Christian must be conscious of belonging to a commonwealth which does not have its origin in this world. As for us, he says, ‘our commonwealth is in heaven’. The Greek word used here is often employed to denote a colony of foreigners. The city of Philippi, though situated in the East, was very much a Latin city, composed largely of Italian colonists with an administration closely modelled on that of Rome. The Philippians would thus have easily understood Paul’s figure of people with a homeland elsewhere. His image is of a colony of heavenly citizens whose true home is in heaven.

Paul does not condemn real human values (cf. 4:8-9): and later he will boast of making himself all things to all men (1Cor 9:22). But the Christian while *in* this world must not be *of* this world, must not lose himself in it, or become absorbed by it. But with his continual restlessness for another city, a better city, he can actually be a reminder to the world itself of the need not to restrict its own

horizons.

In v 21, Paul describes the resurrection of Christians in language that recalls the hymn of 2:6-11. There Christ, though in the form of God, took the form of a slave, and, being found in human form, humbled himself. Here the process is reversed. Christ takes the Christian's lowly body (his person) and transforms it to like his own glorious body.

And the final phrase puts the whole process into a cosmic frame of reference. The power by which Christ will raise believers is the same power by which he is capable of subjecting the whole universe to himself (cf 1Cor 15:27).

It is interesting to see how Paul stresses the victory

of Christ over all things, placing this in the position of emphasis in the sentence. Our modern world outlook, even the Christian outlook is easily reconciled to partial victory, so that we have a psychological difficulty in understanding the Jewish and early Christian concern about the world around them, though this is something we are probably in the process of recapturing. The early Christians inherited the Old Testament conviction that all creation was made for the Spirit, and found incomprehensible any view of salvation which implied escape from the world, and which did not involve also a re-making of the universe. The general resurrection was seen as only part (although a very important part) of God's repossession of all creation which had fallen under the domination of sin.