



## **PAUL'S MASTERWORK: THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS**

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July 2008

In exploring the Apostle Paul in this jubilee year dedicated to him, we begin with Paul's great synthesis of his missionary theology, the Epistle to the Romans.

We do this in respect for the liturgy which features selections from Romans as the second reading at Sunday Mass from June 1 through September 7 (the 9<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> Sundays in Ordinary Time). Ordinarily Romans would have gone to the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday but this year it is replaced by the Triumph of the Cross (September 14) just as earlier Sts. Peter and Paul took the place of the 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday.

Romans is Paul's most important theological legacy though when he wrote it he planned merely to pass through Rome on his way to Spain (1:8-15 and 15:22-29). His policy was not to build on the church foundation that another apostle or missionary had laid (15:14-21). Still, he felt he and the Romans could be mutually enriched by a visit and this "epistle" sets out the main outline of his apostolic strategy.

Some of Paul's writings have the character of a "letter" (e.g. Philemon, First Thessalonians) because they are written to address particular situations. Letters are what we write to our friends.

Others are less occasional writings than, it would seem, highly structured with a major argumentation. So these are more fittingly designated as epistles. An epistle is a thought piece or reflects a literary genre. First Corinthians and Romans are closer to the epistle than to the letter form.

For instance, though First Corinthians addresses many issues, its central theme could be described as an early "Theology of the Body" centered first around Paul's teaching on the Risen Body of Jesus Christ, then relating to the Church as the Body of Christ, followed by his establishing links between the two in meals and worship (the Eucharist) and, finally, Paul's articulating the way the bodily existence of Christians is to be lived in this world (issues of sexuality and concern for the other are central in this).

Romans, too, is highly structured. Paul begins with a teaching on humanity's need for a Saviour and God's answer to that condition of alienation (1:16-8:39). The exhortation to the Romans on how to live their new status as God's adoptive children (12:1-15:13) is separated from the first part of the epistle by a long meditation on the theological difficulty arising from the fact that the majority of the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah (9:1-11:36).

Paul opines that in the end the "all Israel will be saved" because God never takes back his gifts and so that God "may be merciful to all" (11:32)—which leads Paul to burst out in

praise of God's inscrutable designs: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (11:33).

The first part of Romans (chapters 1-8) has several subunits: the proclamation of the God's righteousness being offered to every one willing to believe in God's plan: "the one who is righteous person will live by faith" (1:17)—a text borrowed from the prophet Habakkuk.

In fact, as chapters 1 and 2 show, the world is in a mess. People should have come to know God, but instead turned to idolatry. Jews who possessed the law might have thought that's what pagans do, but not them. However, Paul maintains, all have fallen short and need a saviour.

This God offers them in Christ on the Cross (3:21-26). Abraham exemplifies one who entered into right relationship with God by faith, receiving it as a gift (4:1-25).

Chapters 5-8 describe the new life of the Christian: "justified by faith, we have peace with God through Our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1). Paul shows that humanity knows two corporate representative personalities—Adam and Christ—the former the author of sin and death, the latter the embodiment of obedience and bearer of a life without end (5:12-21).

Believers enter into their new relationship with God through baptism, by which they mystically enter with Christ into the tomb, dying to sin and rising to newness of life (6:1-23). This does not mean the Christian is without a struggle, for the residual effects of sin remain; still he or she may be confident in Christ's deliverance (7:-25).

Chapter 8 speaks of the indwelling Holy Spirit at work not only in the individual Christian being renewed inwardly (calling God "abba—dear Father" like Jesus), but also in the created world that groans to share in the freedom of God's children (8:1-27).

Finally, Paul concludes treatment of the Christian's new life with comforting assertions: that "all things work together for good for those who love God" (8:28) and that nothing past, present or to come, heavenly or earthly, "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord" (8:39).

*Next month: Romans, Part II – The Christian Vocation: Thoughtful Worship*