



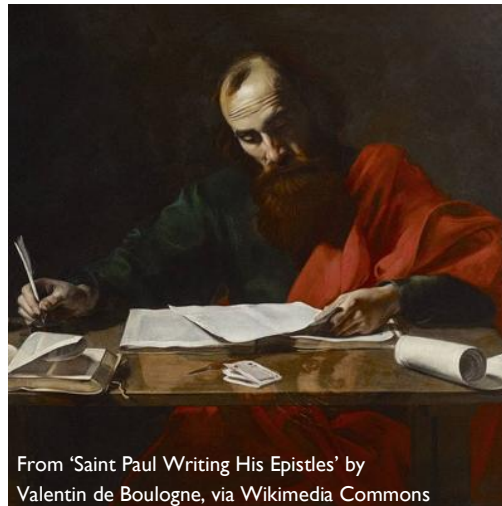
Preparing for Easter with St Paul

Peter Edmonds SJ

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the usage of the lectionary that determines the readings we hear each time we go to Mass, and Lent is a particularly good time for us to pay special attention to it, says Peter Edmonds SJ. How do St Paul's words in the second readings that we will hear on the Sundays of Lent help us to appreciate the gospel texts that follow?

It is easy to overlook anniversaries. One that we may not have noticed is that fifty years have passed since the approval by Pope Paul VI on 3 April 1969 of a new lectionary of readings for the Catholic liturgy of the Mass. This was in response to the request of the bishops at the Second Vatican Council for a greater variety of readings from scripture in the Mass. The Council's 'Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy' directed that, 'the treasures of the bible ... be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare might be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §51) The lectionary that was approved in *Missale Romanum* began to be used on 30 November 1969. We use it still.

We may note two of its innovations. The first was the introduction of the 'responsorial psalm' as a response to the first reading, formerly known as the epistle. This is now well known and taken for granted. A second innovation was the addition of a second reading on Sundays and solemnities, selected from the New Testament letters, to be proclaimed before the gospel. It can be argued that this innovation has been less successful. Ask parishioners after the Sunday Mass about the topic and author of the second reading, and many will admit that they cannot answer. In this article, we want to look at the second readings selected from Pauline letters in the third year of the Sunday cycle for Lent. We believe that they are a treasure providing rich fare for our preparation for Easter.



From 'Saint Paul Writing His Epistles' by Valentin de Boulogne, via Wikimedia Commons

We notice first that the second reading on these Lenten Sundays is selected according to a different system compared to that used during the period of the 'Sundays in Ordinary Time'. In ordinary time, these letters are read 'semi-continuously', so that a preacher can treat a particular letter over a period of weeks. An example of this is the use of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians during the first Sundays in ordinary time. In year A, we hear extracts

from chapters 1-4; in year B, we hear extracts from chapters 5-10; and in year C, from chapters 11-15. These readings are distinct from the Old Testament passage used as first reading and from the gospel. They are presented as an alternative rather than a compliment to these other readings. In Lent, things are different. The second reading is designed as an introduction and even a commentary on the gospel reading. They help us appreciate the gospel reading at a deeper level.

These [gospel readings in Year C](#) are taken from Luke, with the exception of the passage about the woman taken in adultery which is taken from John's Gospel on the fifth Sunday. However, because it is not found in many early manuscripts of John, it is commonly attributed to Luke. As we prepare for Easter, we may trace a Lenten catechesis in our readings from Paul, which runs in parallel to that of the gospel readings. On the first Sunday we listen to Paul's [Letter to the Romans](#) and confess our belief in the 'Lordship' of Jesus. On the second Sunday, as we hear Paul's [Letter to the Philippians](#), we reflect on our own dignity as people being transformed by this Lord. On the third Sunday, with the help of Paul's [First Letter to the Corinthians](#), we reflect on our need for repentance

and penance. On the fourth Sunday, we identify ourselves with Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians as ministers of reconciliation. On the fifth Sunday, again turning to the Letter to the Philippians, we look to the future and the prize of life in Christ that it promises. On Passion Sunday, the final Sunday of Lent, we have a chance to hear and assimilate the so-called 'kenosis' hymn of the Letter to the Philippians, as a preparation for the solemn proclamation of the Passion of the Lord. Let us reflect on these passages from Paul in a little more detail.

Faith

On the first Sunday of Lent, we hear an extract from Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul is struggling with the problem that so many of his co-religionists have failed to recognise and accept Jesus as their Messiah. In the few verses we hear today (Romans 10:8-13), Paul, as himself a faithful member of his people, calls to his help words of Moses found in the book of Deuteronomy together with passages from the prophets Isaiah and Joel. His point is a simple one. In this age of God's new covenant with his people, the confession required for those looking for salvation (a word repeated three times), is a simple one: they need simply confess that 'Jesus is Lord'; they must believe in their hearts that 'God raised him from the dead'. It is a confession bringing salvation that is open to everyone.

This confession prepares us to listen to the gospel story of the [temptations of Jesus](#) in which Jesus, tempted three times by Satan, makes his own the words of Deuteronomy, that 'man does not live on bread alone', that 'you must worship the Lord your God', that 'you must not put the Lord your God to the test' (Luke 4:1-13). At this beginning of Lent, with St Paul we make a basic confession of our faith: Jesus does the same in his conflict with Satan in the desert in the days before he begins his public ministry.

Hope

On the second Sunday of Lent, we move from the desert of temptations to the mountain of transfiguration. Paul helps us prepare for this with an extract from his Letter to the Philippians (Philippians 3:17-4:1). The key word here is transformation, sometimes translated as 'transfiguration'. Paul in his letters uses a number of metaphors to express what is meant by our sharing in the death and resurrection of the Lord.

This is one of them. The Latin poet Ovid wrote a collection of poems entitled 'metamorphoses', relating a series of myths about heroes and heroines who changed shape. There were many popular stories around in those days about gods and goddesses who adopted human forms and about humans taking the shape of animals.

In the [gospel story](#), we hear how even in his earthly life, Jesus was transfigured in the presence of three of his leading disciples on an unnamed mountain in Galilee. 'The aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became brilliant as lightning' (Luke 9:28-36). Thanks to the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul assures his converts in this Greek city of Philippi that 'the Lord Jesus Christ will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body'. This reminder of our own destiny to glory, and the sight of Jesus himself reflecting his glory, reminds us that Lent is a time for rekindling our hope. If on the first Sunday, we pray for an increase in faith, on this second, we pray for a deepening of our hope.

Repentance

On the third Sunday of Lent, we hear from a third letter of Paul, his First letter to the Corinthians. We might well be somewhat astonished at the boldness of Paul's imagery. He recalls the tradition of Moses drawing water from a rock for his thirsty people during their trek through the desert. 'The rock', he writes, 'was Christ' (1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12)! Paul's point was that was God was guiding his people. He fed them with manna and gave them water from a rock. But despite all this, the people 'failed to please God' and so 'their corpses littered the desert'. Paul makes his point clear. Their fate was a warning to the lax and sinful among his Corinthian converts who had been washed in the waters of baptism.

Paul's call for repentance anticipates the same call that Christ makes to the crowds in our [gospel reading from Luke](#) (Luke 13:1-9). Today then we remind ourselves that our Lent is a time for repentance, a challenge to us to turn away from sin and sinful habits, and we may apply it to ourselves as, with Paul, we recall dramatic incidents of salvation history. The quality of our faith and the solidity of our hope, which we have stressed on two previous Sundays, rest on a spirit of true repentance.

Reconciliation

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, we hear one of the best known and loved of the parables of Jesus, the parable of the father who had two sons, best known as the [parable of the prodigal son](#) (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32). Again, we are invited to prepare ourselves for this by a reading from Paul. This time we turn to Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians (5:17-21). A key word, repeated five times in our translation, is reconciliation. What was Christ doing when he died on the cross and rose from the tomb? We have learnt on a previous Sunday that he was transforming us. Now we learn that he was reconciling us. In fact, Paul adds, he was creating us anew, because 'for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation'.

This teaching of Paul prepares us for the reconciliation related in the gospel when the father of the prodigal son gives the order, 'Quick. Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet'. All this is possible, says Paul, because 'God made the sinless one into sin'. This truth provides us with the doctrinal foundation for Jesus's teaching and behaviour, illustrated in gospel parables such as the one we hear today. As a penitent church founded on firm faith and solid hope, we are summoned to unite ourselves with Christ, and Paul himself, and to exercise a ministry of reconciliation in a world marked by so many divisions.

The future

The gospel reading of the fifth Sunday of Lent gives us the story of Jesus and [the woman caught in adultery](#) (John 8:1-11). As preparation for this, we return to Paul's Letter to the Philippians (3:8-14). This is one of the rare passages in Paul's letters where he writes about himself. His hearers would be familiar with the athletic contests of those times such as the Isthmian Games. He compares his own activities before his conversion to Christ as a [participation in a race](#), a race to persecute Christians. But before he reached the winning post, he was overtaken by Christ and what is more, regarded everything he had striven for previously as of no more worth than rubbish. He had been captured by Christ, a name he repeats six times in our passage. Certainly, he was determined to sin no more.

Paul can be taken as a model for the sinful woman in the gospel who was told by Jesus 'to sin no more'.

With Paul in Philippians, we are 'to forget the past and strain ahead for what is still to come'. With him, we are 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection'. Our own encounters with the Christ, who is our Lord, give us the confidence to press on in the world in which we live, as people of faith and hope confident in the Lord's forgiveness.

Bending the knee

On Passion Sunday, the Sunday that marks the beginning of Holy Week, we listen to and participate in the solemn [reading of the Passion](#), this year according to Luke (22:14-23:56). Paul helps us to prepare for this experience with more verses from his Letter to the Philippians. For most of this letter, Paul writes positively of his converts in Philippi; they are his 'joy' and his 'crown', his 'beloved' (4:1), but in his second chapter, he faces up to a malaise that was corrupting the community, the selfishness and conceit of certain of its members.

Generally, Paul as a pastor dealt with the problems he met with an appeal to theology. On this occasion, he inserts what is probably a hymn already known to his readers about the 'emptying' that was required to deal with selfishness and conceit. The best example he could give of 'emptying' (*kenosis* in Greek) was that of Christ himself. This took place in three stages. The first was his dignity as one who was pre-existent and equal to God. The second was his acceptance of the human condition and the humiliation in suffering the agony of death on a cross. The third was his exaltation by God which brought him the homage of all creation. What the prophet Isaiah had written long ago about God, that to him 'every knee should bend' (Isaiah 45:23), is now applied in the hymn to Jesus after his exaltation through resurrection (Phil 2:6-11).

Serious meditation on this '*kenosis* hymn' will surely prepare us for a fruitful response to the passion story. May this passage from Philippians prove a fitting climax to the six brief passages from the letters of Paul which have been offered us as a sample of the treasures which the lectionary, now fifty years old, offers us 'at the table of God's word'. Thanks to them, may we come better 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection' (Philippians 3:10) at Easter time.

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