



**PASTORAL LETTER  
OF THE  
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM  
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ST PAUL: WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION**

At this time, Pope Benedict has invited us to observe a 'Year of St Paul'. He asks us to take new inspiration from the life and teaching of this great Apostle. I offer this Pastoral Letter as my reflection on St Paul as a witness to the Resurrection.

Paul always insisted that the Risen Lord is central to faith. That was his experience and his teaching. It is summed up well in today's Second Reading (Phil 2.1-11)

His conversion to Christ came about through the appearance to him of the Risen Lord, on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.4-6). From then on Paul was overwhelmed by Christ. He tells us: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal.2.20). He also knew that this mission to preach the Gospel had been given to him by the Risen Christ (Roms 1.5; 1 Cor 9.1; Gal 1.1). This always remained his joyful sense of purpose.

In his teaching, St Paul insists that in the Resurrection of Christ, God fulfils all the promises made to the Chosen People. In the Risen Christ, God has made known "the mystery of his will... a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth" (Eph 1.9-10). In him the promised new heaven and earth (Is 60; 65.17; Rev 21-22), where justice and peace will reign (cf Is 40), in which the hills will "ring out their joy" and "the rivers clap their hands" (Ps 98/97) has begun to happen (1 Cor 15.20-28).

Paul proclaims that in raising Jesus from the dead God has broken the power of death. Death can no longer reduce everything permanently to ashes for in Christ are to be found "the first fruits" of the new creation (1 Cor 15.20). He is "the firstborn from the dead", the first in the new life of peace and reconciliation on earth and in heaven (Col 1.18-20). This means that in Christ we are redeemed not simply from death and sin but for the new order of life, for the new kingdom (2 Cor 5.17).

There are two aspects of his teaching I would like to stress: one about our daily living; the other about our dying.

First of all, St Paul tells us that in baptism we 'were buried with Christ'; we died with him (Rom 6.3-5), so that through baptism we live this new life with him (Eph 2.5; Col 2.12). We are part of the new life Christ lives in God (2 Cor 5.17).

Our task, now, is to cultivate this new life: nurturing acceptance and forgiveness; working for family peace and harmony; struggling to be honest and teach honesty; striving for sexual maturity and faithfulness. In so many ways we are giving expression to the new life of Christ. As we have heard today, in our minds we are to be the same as Christ Jesus (Phil 2.5). We are co-workers with God as he builds his kingdom (2 Cor 5.20-6.1).

At the same time, Paul recognises that we are also part of this old, present order, the world of sin, greed, power, selfishness, envy and injustice. In this Paul makes clear to us why we constantly experience in ourselves, and in our world, the conflicts between good and evil, between the new and the old (Rom 7.14ff).

Despite what politicians and others might say, we know that we can never achieve the kingdom here, in the present world. We always have to struggle. It will come about when Christ “hands over the kingdom of God the Father after he has destroyed every ruler, authority and power” (1 Cor 15.24). But by our cooperation with the Holy Spirit we help to bring about this new life here and now. We try to live as we pray: ‘Thy kingdom come.’ The resurrection of Christ, then, is not only a promise of life after death but also a summons to what we must do today.

The second thing we learn from St Paul is that the new creation being built by God for which we are working is not simply a future spiritual reality. Rather it will entail a new kind of physical reality: a new earth, a new body. This is hard to take in. Our destiny is not simply to rest in peace in God’s presence for ever. We are to be part of “a new heaven and a new earth”.

This is why, with St Paul, we believe in the resurrection of the body. Remember our faith: when we die we “go to God” to await the final resurrection. This includes the resurrection of our bodies. Just as the risen Jesus has a physical presence – seen and touched – so shall we (Rom 8.11). Of course, Jesus’ risen presence was startlingly different from his presence before death, yet he was really present and recognisable. So, too, will it be for us (1 Cor 15.42). The faith that sustains us at the graveside declares: with Christ I will rise again! This is the true victory over death.

This full meaning of the Resurrection is easily forgotten. We think of death as removing us from this earth and this body. Yet, in the fashion of Jesus, this earth and this body are to be transformed into a new creation (Rom 6.5; Phil 3.20-21).

This means that we hold in respect every part of this created earth, and especially, the physical body of every human being. We never view them with disdain. We nurture and care for our bodies and our world because, in God’s own mysterious way, they are to be transformed – not discarded – in our eternal future, the new creation that is to come.

These two points come together when St Paul says that, for now, all creation groans in giving birth to the new creation, already seen and established in the Risen Christ (Rom 8.22). We are empowered by the Holy Spirit for this work of ‘giving birth’ and for it we are nurtured by the Sacraments and tutored by the Church. It is made up of our daily acts of forgiveness and compassion, struggles for justice, patterns of prayer and faithfulness, tolerance and patience in trials. Do remember that none of this daily effort, here in this world, is lost. Every bit of good we do and everything we suffer, when united to Christ, is taken up into the fabric of the new creation and fashioned into his kingdom.

This is the vision given to us by St Paul. By reflecting on it we can gain so much inspiration and strength for our daily life. We can draw from St Paul our steadfast sense of purpose in life, and our own hope and joy.

I pray that this Year of St Paul will be a time of blessing for us all.



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Given at Birmingham on the 16 September 2008 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the weekend of 27 and 28 of September 2008, the 26th Sunday of the Year.