GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 27 August 2008

Life of Saint Paul

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the last Catechesis before the holidays, two months ago, at the beginning of July, I began a new series of topics on the occasion of the Pauline Year, examining the world in which St Paul lived. Today I would like to resume and continue the reflection on the Apostle to the Gentiles, presenting a brief biography of him. Since we shall be dedicating next Wednesday to the extraordinary event that occurred on the road to Damascus, Paul's conversion, a fundamental turning point in his life subsequent to his encounter with Christ, let us briefly pause today on his life as a whole. We find Paul's biographical details respectively in the Letter to Philemon, in which he says he is "an old man" (Phlm 9: *presbytes*) and in the Acts of the Apostles in which, at the time of the stoning of Stephen, he is described as "a young man" (7: 58: *neanías*). Both these expressions are obviously generic but, according to ancient calculations, a man of about 30 was described as "young" whereas he would be called "old" by the time he had reached the age of about 60. The date of Paul's birth depends largely on the dating of the Letter to Philemon. He is traditionally supposed to have written it during his imprisonment in Rome in the mid-60s. Paul would have been born in approximately the year 8. He would therefore have been about 30 at the time of the stoning of Stephen. This ought to be the correct chronology and we are celebrating the Pauline Year in accordance with precisely this chronology. The year 2008 was chosen with a date of birth of about the year 8 in mind. In any case, Paul was born in Tarsus, Cilicia (cf. Acts 22: 3). The town was the administrative capital of the region and in 51 B.C. had had as Proconsul no less than Marcus Tullius Cicero himself, while 10 years later, in 41, Tarsus was the place where Mark Anthony and Cleopatra met for the first time. A Jew from the Diaspora, he spoke Greek although his name was of Latin origin. Moreover, it derived by assonance from the original Jewish Saul/Saulos, and he was a Roman citizen (cf. Acts 22:

25-28). Paul thus appears to be at the intersection between three different cultures - Roman, Greek and Jewish - and perhaps partly because of this was disposed for fruitful universalistic openness, for a mediation between cultures, for true universality. He also learned a manual trade, perhaps from his father, that of "tentmaker" (Acts 18: 3:
skenopoios
). This should probably be understood as a worker of uncarded goat wool or linen fibres who made them into mats or tents (cf. Acts 20: 33-35). At about the age of 12 to 13, the age in which a Jewish boy becomes
a
bar mitzvah
("son of the commandment"), Paul left Tarsus and moved to Jerusalem to be educated at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder, a nephew of the great Rabbi Hillel, in accordance with the strictest Pharisaic norms and acquiring great zeal for the Mosaic Torah (cf. Gal 1: 14; Phil 3: 5-6; Acts 22: 3; 23: 6; 26: 5).

On the basis of this profound Orthodoxy that he learned at the school of Hillel in Jerusalem, he saw the new movement that referred to Jesus of Nazareth as a risk, a threat to the Jewish identity, to the true Orthodoxy of the fathers. This explains the fact that he proudly "persecuted the Church of God" as he was to admit three times in his Letters (1 Cor 15: 9; Gal 1: 13; Phil 3: 6). Although it is not easy to imagine in what this persecution actually consisted, his attitude was intolerant. It is here that the event of Damascus fits in; we shall return to it at our next Catechesis. It is certain that from this time Paul's life changed and he became a tireless apostle of the Gospel. Indeed, Paul passed into history for what he did as a Christian, indeed as an Apostle, rather than as a Pharisee. Traditionally his apostolic activity is divided on the basis of his three missionary journeys, to which can be added a fourth, his voyage to Rome as a prisoner. They are all recounted by Luke in the Acts. With regard to the three missionary journeys, however, the first must be distinguished from the other two.

In fact, Paul was not directly responsible for the first (cf. Acts 13-14), which was instead entrusted to the Cypriot, Barnabas. They sailed together from Antioch on the Orontes River, sent out by that Church (cf. Acts 13: 1-3) and having sailed from the port of Seleucia on the Syrian coast, crossed the island of Cyprus from Salamis to Paphos; from here they reached the southern coasts of Anatolia, today Turkey, and passed through the cities of Attalia, Perga in Pamphylia, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, from which they returned to their starting point. Thus was born the Church of the people, the Church of the Gentiles. And in the meantime, especially in Jerusalem, a discussion had been sparked, lasting until, in order to participate truly in the promises of the prophets and enter effectively into the heritage of Israel, these Christians who came from paganism were obliged to adhere to the life and laws of Israel (various observances and prescriptions that separated Israel from the rest of the world). To resolve this fundamental problem for the birth of the future Church the so-called Council of the Apostles met in Jerusalem to settle on a solution, on which the effective birth of a universal Church depended. And it was decided that the observance of Mosaic Law should not be

imposed upon converted pagans (cf. Acts 15: 6-30): that is, they were not to be bound by the rules of Judaism; the only thing necessary was to belong to Christ, to live with Christ and to abide by his words. Thus, in belonging to Christ, they also belonged to Abraham and to God, and were sharers in all the promises. After this decisive event Paul separated from Barnabas, chose Silas and set out on his second missionary journey (Acts 15: 36-18: 22). Having gone beyond Syria and Cilicia, he saw once again the city of Lystra where he was joined by Timothy (a very important figure in the nascent Church, the son of a Jewish woman and a pagan), whom he had circumcised; he crossed Central Anatolia and reached the city of Troas on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea. And here another important event happened: in a dream he saw a Macedonian from the other side of the sea, that is, in Europe, who was saying: "Come and help us!". It was the Europe of the future that was asking for the light and help of the Gospel. On the impetus of this vision he set sail for Macedonia and thus entered Europe. Having disembarked at Neapolis, he arrived at Philippi, where he founded a beautiful community. He then travelled to Thessalonica. Having left this place because of the problems the Jews created for him, he passed through Beroea to Athens. In this capital of ancient Greek culture, he preached to pagans and Greeks, first in the Agora and then on the Areopagus. And the discourse of the Areopagus, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, is the model of how to translate the Gospel into Greek culture, of how to make Greeks understand that this God of the Christians and Jews was not a God foreign to their culture but the unknown God they were awaiting, the true answer to the deepest questions of their culture. Then from Athens he arrived in Corinth, where he stayed for a year and a half. And here we have an event that is chronologically very reliable. It is the most reliable date in the whole of his biography because, during this first stay in Corinth he was obliged to appear before the Governor of the Senatorial Province of Achaia, the Proconsul Gallio, who accused him of illegitimate worship. In Corinth there is an ancient inscription, found in Delphi, which mentions this Gallio and that epoch. It says that Gallio was Proconsul in Corinth between the years 51 and 53. Thus we have one absolutely certain date. Paul stayed in Corinth in those years. We may therefore suppose that he arrived there in about the year 50 and stayed until 52. Then from Corinth, passing through Cenchreae, the port on the eastern side of the city, he set sail for Palestine and arrived in Caesarea Marittima. From here he sailed for Jerusalem, before returning to Antioch on the Orontes.

The third missionary journey (cf. Acts 18: 23-21: 16), began, like all his journeys, in Antioch, which had become the original core of the Church of the Gentiles, of the mission to the Gentiles, and was also the place where the term "Christian" was coined. It was here, St Luke tells us, that Jesus' followers were called "Christians" for the first time. From Antioch Paul started out for Ephesus, the capital of the Province of Asia where he stayed two years, carrying out a ministry whose fruitful effects were felt throughout the region. It was from Ephesus that Paul wrote the Letters to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. The population of the town, however, was set against him by the local silversmiths, who saw their income diminishing with the reduction in the number of those who worshipped Artemis (the temple dedicated to her in Ephesus, the *Artemys ion,* was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world); Paul was thus forced to flee north. He crossed Macedonia once again and went back to Greece, probably to Corinth, where he remained for three months and wrote his famous Letter to the Romans.

From here he retraced his steps: he went back through Macedonia, reaching Troas by boat, and then, staying very briefly on the islands of Mitylene, Chios and Samos, arrived at Miletus where he delivered an important discourse to the elders of the Church of Ephesus, outlining a portrait of a true Pastor of the Church (cf. Acts 20). From here he set sail for Tyre from whence he came to Caesarea Marittima, on his return journey to Jerusalem. Here he was arrested on the basis of a misunderstanding. Certain Jews had mistaken other Jews of Greek origin for Gentiles, whom Paul had taken into the temple precinct reserved for Israelites. He was spared the inevitable death sentence by the intervention of the Roman tribune on guard in the Temple area (cf. Acts 21: 27-36); this happened while the imperial Procurator in Judea was Antonius Felix. After a spell in prison (the duration of which is debated), and since Paul as a Roman citizen was an appellee of Caesar (at that time Nero), the subsequent Procurator, Porcius Festus, sent him to Rome under military escort.

The voyage to Rome involved putting in at the Mediterranean islands of Crete and Malta, and then the cities of Syracuse, Rhegium Calabria and Puteoli. The Roman Christians went down the Appian Way to meet him at the Appii Forum (about 70 km from the capital), and others went as far as Three Taverns (*c.* 40 km). In Rome he met the delegates of the Jewish community, whom he told that it was for "the hope of Israel" that he was in chains (Acts 28: 20). However, Luke's account ends with the mention of two years spent in Rome under mild military surveillance. Luke mentions neither a sentence of Caesar (Nero) nor, even less, the death of the accused. Later traditions speak of his liberation which would have been propitious for either a missionary journey to Spain or a subsequent episode in the East, and specifically in Crete, Ephesus and Nicopolis in Epirus. Still on a hypothetical basis, another arrest is conjectured and a second imprisonment in Rome (where he is supposed to have written the three so-called Pastoral Letters, that is, the two to Timothy and the Letter to Titus), with a second trial that would have proven unfavourable to him. Yet a series of reasons induce many scholars of St Paul to end his biography with Luke's narrative in the Acts.

We shall return to his martyrdom later in the cycle of our Catecheses. For the time being, in this brief list of Paul's journeys it suffices to note how dedicated he was to proclaiming the Gospel, sparing no energy, confronting a series of grave trials, of which he left us a list in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 11: 21-28). Moreover, it is he who writes: "I do it all for the sake of the Gospel" (1 Cor 9: 23), exercising with unreserved generosity what he called "anxiety for the Churches" (2 Cor 11: 28). We see a commitment that can only be explained by a soul truly fascinated by the light of the Gospel, in love with Christ, a soul sustained by profound conviction; it is necessary to bring Christ's light to the world, to proclaim the Gospel to all of us. This seems to me to be what remains for us from this brief review of St Paul's journeys: to see his passion for the Gospel and thereby grasp the greatness, the beauty, indeed the deep need of the Gospel for all of us. Let us pray the Lord who caused St Paul to see his light, who made him hear his word and profoundly moved his heart, that we may also see his light, so that our

hearts too may be moved by his Word and thus that we too may give the light of the Gospel and the truth of Christ to today's world which thirsts for it.

[The Holy Father then greeted pilgrims in several languages. In English, he said:]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's catechesis presents the life of Saint Paul, the great missionary whom the Church honors in a special way this year. Born a Jew in Tarsus, he received the Hebrew name "Saul" and was trained as a "tent maker" (cf. Acts 18:3). Around the age of twelve he departed for Jerusalem to begin instruction in the strict Pharisaic tradition which instilled in him a great zeal for the Mosaic Law. On the basis of this training, Paul viewed the Christian movement as a threat to orthodox Judaism. He thus fiercely "persecuted the Church of God" (1 Corinthians 19:6; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6) until a dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus radically changed his life. He subsequently undertook three missionary journeys, preaching Christ in Anatolia, Syria, Cilicia, Macedonia, Achaia, and throughout the Mediterranean. After his arrest and imprisonment in Jerusalem, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case to the Emperor. Though Luke makes no reference to Nero's decision, he tells us that Paul spent two years under house arrest in Rome (cf. Acts 28:30), after which -- according to tradition -- he suffered a martyr's death. Paul spared no energy and endured many trials in his "anxiety for all the Churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). Indeed, he wrote: "I do everything for the sake of the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:23). May we strive to emulate him by doing the same.