

St. Paul in Trying Times

By Bishop Victor Galeone

As the present economic downturn continues to stymie most of us, I want to offer some insights from St. Paul's letters. In this year commemorating 2,000 years since his birth, these insights might prove helpful.

Have you ever wondered why among St. Paul's thirteen letters, not one is addressed to the Athenians? Mind you, we have two letters to the Christians in Corinth—the "Sin City" of the Roman Empire—but not a line to the citizens of Athens—the capital of the entire Greek world! Why is that? The answer is found in the speech that St. Paul delivered on his visit to Athens, recorded in Acts 17:22-31. Reading that passage shows that St. Paul attempted to flatter his listeners by citing pagan authors, with no mention of the core gospel message—Jesus' saving death on the cross. His efforts were a failure.

The next chapter begins, "After this, Paul left Athens for Corinth." Some years later, in the first letter he wrote to the Corinthians, he admitted: "When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or wisdom...For I was determined to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In the previous chapter, he had already told them, "Jews demand miracles and Gentiles look for wisdom, while we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and utter foolishness to Gentiles; but for those who have been called, both Jew and Gentile, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God."

So what can we learn from St. Paul as we see our pensions, portfolios and job security evaporating?

- Be content with what you have: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things in him (= Christ) who strengthens me." (Ph. 4:12-13)
- Realize the source of your talents and possessions: "What do you have, that you have not received? If, then, you received it, how can you boast as if it were yours?" (1 Cor. 4:7)
- God loves us not for being good, but because we need him: "He loved me, and gave himself up for me...the greatest of all sinners." (Gal. 2:20 & 1 Tim. 1:15)
- True wealth comes from Jesus: "Remember how generous the Lord Jesus was: he was rich, but for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich [spiritually]." (2 Cor. 8:9)
- Paul's great desire is that we come to know Christ, "...in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Col. 2:3)
- Life has only one meaning for Paul: "Life for me is Christ..." (Ph. 1:21)
- Compared with Jesus, all else is rubbish: After listing everything that was dear to him as an observant Jew, Paul concludes: "...nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish, if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him...All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death." (Ph. 3:8-10)

Before concluding, I'd like to cite an analogy from someone whom I deeply admire—Cardinal Avery Dulles. He passed away last December at the age of 90. Raised a Presbyterian, he became an agnostic while attending Harvard before converting to Catholicism in 1940. Six years later, he entered the

Jesuits. Then in 2001, Pope John Paul made him a cardinal. The incident that impressed me about Cardinal Dulles was the response he gave to his students on being asked what was the greatest event of his career: “The most important thing about my career...is the discovery of the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field—the Lord Jesus himself.” A response worthy of St. Paul!

I would like to close by challenging you, the faithful, as I have done in the past. My challenge is this: Deepen your relationship with Jesus. “How is that done?” The same way that we deepen our relationship with anyone that we’re very fond of: by spending more time with him. “But we can’t see Jesus.” Not with the eyes of our body, but we can see him with the eyes of faith. Specifically, let’s set aside at least ten minutes each day to prayerfully read a chapter from the New Testament. Start with St. John’s Gospel. Put a bookmark where you leave off in order to continue the next day. “But I have so little time!” Really? How much time do you spend watching TV? Or on the Internet? Or on the phone? Remember, the daily practice that I’m suggesting will help you to discover the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field—the Lord Jesus himself!