

Second Reading, 11th to 14th Sundays : Year B, 2021

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

In Year B, sections of St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians are read from the 7th to the 14th Sundays in Ordinary Time. In 2021 we begin from the 11th and go through to 14th Sunday. The readings are taken from chapters 5, 8 and 12 of 2 Corinthians.

We read passages taken from the 13 chapters of 2 Corinthians every second year from Monday of the Tenth Week of Ordinary Time to Saturday of the Eleventh Week, inclusive. It is also read on the Feast of Holy Trinity in Year A and on the 4th Sunday of Lent, Year C.

Readings for Ordinary Time – Year B

Eleventh Sunday, 2 Corinthians 5:6–10

Paul seeks to counter Corinthian arguments about the body by asserting that the key point is to strive in discipleship, to be 'intent on pleasing' the Lord. Whether we are physically strong or weak, as Paul says he is, God's final judgment will be based on what we did while alive 'in the body'.

Twelfth Sunday, 2 Corinthians 5:14–17

Paul continues to appeal to the Corinthian community's identification with the death of Christ and draws out the universal significance of his death, viz. that he 'died for all'. Paul then reminds them of two things: that all believers must pattern their lives after Christ's, and that by living in Christ, believers are now 'in a new creation' which is beyond life in the flesh.

Thirteenth Sunday, 2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13–15

Paul urges the Corinthians to give generously to a collection for the Jerusalem community. He flatters them with regard to their spiritual gifts, he reminds them that Jesus suffered to make others 'rich out of his poverty', and then makes a third approach, urging them to strike a balance between their present need and their future needs for resources and support.

Fourteenth Sunday, 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Paul's boast is his weakness; his 'thorn in the flesh' stops him from becoming too proud. He does not seek to overcome weakness or avoid suffering. Instead, he is content. In fact, it is a 'special boast' that this weakness becomes powerful testimony: it is God at work in Paul's life and ministry, not simply Paul's own powers at work. In suffering for Christ's sake Paul can say that 'when I am weak ... I am strong'.

Background to the Second Letter to the Corinthians

The relationship between Paul and the community of Corinth is of great significance to Christianity. Corinth was an important city, a place of Greek thinking and culture, a cosmopolitan and busy commercial centre. It was a cultural meeting point, bringing together people of many different backgrounds and beliefs. It was also regarded as a city devoted to the pursuit of personal pleasure, where materialism and immorality were part of the social fabric.

Paul had preached the gospel in Corinth about 50 AD, both to the local Jews and to Gentiles, and probably remained in the area for up to two years. After he left, he received disturbing news of practices, attitudes and beliefs among the Corinthian Christians. The *First Letter to the Corinthians* was his impassioned response.

Paul's contacts with the Corinthians lasted at least a decade, and there is more Pauline correspondence with the Corinthians than with any other community. According to scholars, Paul may have written four or more letters to the communities in Corinth.

Many scholars believe that 2 Corinthians is made up of at least two letters and was written a year or so after 1 Corinthians. By that time, the relationship between the two parties had changed and was now strained. Paul is more defensive than in his earlier writings.

The first nine chapters contain an expression of gratitude for the change that has taken place among the local believers, while the last four chapters contain Paul's strong defence of himself and the work that he'd been doing.

It seems that during Paul's unexpected and prolonged absence from Corinth, people he calls 'false apostles' had arrived, undermined his authority, and promoted ideas that ran counter to his preaching. He wrote to stress his sufferings and rejection but also to defend his ministry as legitimate and confirm his authority among them as a true apostle. He prepares them for his coming visit and appeals to their generosity so that they might contribute money for Titus to take to the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul wrote from Macedonia, in late 57 AD.

Main Themes and Structure of the Letter

There are many ways that the letter's main themes can be summarised. One summary is:

- Paul's suffering and consolation; his past anxiety and present relief
- Paul's confidence in the apostolic office despite its hardships
- Paul's sincerity and honesty
- Titus' report on the effect of the reproachful letter he had earlier brought to the community in Corinth from Paul
- The appeal concerning the collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem
- Re-affirmation of Paul's apostolic authority.

Brown's outline of the structure of the letter is:

- Address, greeting and thanksgiving, stressing Paul's sufferings (1:1–11)
- Paul's relations with the Corinthian Christians (1:12–7:16)
- Collection for the church in Jerusalem (8:1–9:15)
- Paul's response to challenges to his apostolic authority (10:1–13:10)
- Concluding greetings, blessings (13:11–13)

Further Reading

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapter 34: The Gospel According to Mark. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 23, Second Letter to the Corinthians. Doubleday

Harold A Buetow, *The New Out of the Old*, Meditations/homilies for the Weekdays of the Year, Vol 2, St Matthew (notes on 2 Corinthians). St Paul's

David N Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Eerdmans

Maria A Pascuzzi, *First and Second Corinthians*. Vol 7, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

John J Pilch, *The Cultural World of the Apostles*. The Second Reading, Year by Year. Year B. Liturgical Press