

This weekend Pope Benedict XVI is inaugurating a special year in honor of St. Paul the Apostle. Historians believe that Paul was born sometime between the years 7 and 10 AD, so the pope is setting aside this time, from now until next June 29, as a year of jubilee, to give God thanks for the birth of St. Paul 2000 years ago. There is a legend that Saints Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome on this day around the year 67 AD. We celebrate the conversion of St. Paul on January 25 each year, possibly because that was the day on which later Christians moved his remains from the catacombs to the basilica of St. Paul outside the Walls of Rome. We have no idea on what day Paul was born. This is his biggest feast, so the jubilee year will begin and end with this date.

The bible tells us only a little about Paul's early life, and we can surmise more from the typical lives of his contemporaries. Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, which is still thriving today in Turkey. Israel forms the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. If you go north from there and follow the coast as it starts to bend west, that's where Tarsus is. Paul was born under the name of Saul and was raised as a Jew, having been circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, as was the custom. He says he was born a Roman citizen. We don't know how that happened, but it's possible that his father received Roman citizenship as an honor for some outstanding duty he had performed. Paul's father would have been his first teacher, but he credits a rabbi named Gamaliel as having an influence on his education. The New Testament letters were written in Greek, so we know Paul spoke that language. He learned how to make tents and work leather – probably from his father, and he valued employment and fair wages. Saul would have been a young adult when Jesus died, but there is no indication he ever met Jesus at that time. As a faithful Jew, he probably took offense at the belief that the Messiah had come only to be killed on a cross. So he joined in the persecution of Christians, who held this belief. When Saint Stephen was martyred, Saul stood by approvingly. All that changed when the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus; Saul was blinded by the light, but then opened his eyes to faith. After that, he was known as Paul. He is more responsible for the spread of Christianity than anyone except Jesus. More than one fourth of the New Testament is attributed to him.

In the Second Letter to Timothy, apparently written from prison under the realization that he would soon die, Paul writes the famous lines we heard in our second reading today: "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith." He compares his efforts for the sake of the gospel to those of an athlete preparing for the race, following the rules of the course, and finishing as a winner.

The story of Saint Paul is the story of a man who grew up as a strong believer, but who still underwent a conversion to become a better instrument of God. As we celebrate this special year of jubilee, let us heed the words of Saint Paul, and also imitate his life. He did not live for himself; he let Christ live in him.