

**Southwark Diocesan Gathering at Aylesford Priory to celebrate The Year of Saint Paul  
Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2009  
Homily given by Archbishop Kevin McDonald at the Mass**

We are gathered here today for a Diocesan Mass, a Diocesan celebration. We celebrate the fact that we are a local Church here in the South East of England, a Church with a proud history that looks back to St Augustine of Canterbury, St. Anselm who we celebrate this year, St Thomas à Beckett, St John Fisher and many others. But we come together for a reason. In a sense, we're called together by the Pope. Pope Benedict proclaimed a year dedicated to St Paul the Apostle and that year is now drawing to a close. The fact that we are having our main Diocesan event at the end of the year is good, I think, in that memories and anniversaries of this kind should not just be an occasion for looking back, or remembering. They should be an opportunity to look to the future in the light of our history, our tradition. St Paul will be of central importance for Christianity long after we are all gone and forgotten. And he was, of course, a central figure in the beginnings, the origins of the Christian religion and his place in the memory and imagination and the hope of Christians can never be erased. So let us just reflect on the figure of St Paul, drawing on the readings we have heard in this Mass and also some of the words of Pope Benedict who obviously had a reason for inviting us to read and ponder the writings of St Paul. And for those of you who only know the writings of St Paul from the Sunday readings, let me encourage you when you return home to pick up your Bible and to read his letters. Let them speak to you in a personal way.

We refer to St Paul as an apostle but he was not one of the twelve Apostles. He wasn't called by Jesus like St Peter, St Matthew and the rest of the twelve. He was a Jew who after the death of Jesus persecuted those of his fellow Jews who had become followers of Christ – those Jews for whom Christ was not only dead but also risen and risen as Lord and Saviour. For Paul – or Saul as he was then called – these followers of Christ had betrayed the Jewish religion. But all that was turned on its head by Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus. His faith, his conversion was not the result of a long process of reflection and discernment at the end of which he concluded that Jesus was the Messiah. No, his conversion was the result of the direct action and intervention of God. God's free action and free choice of Saul was the source and origin of his conversion. And it was a choice that flew in the face of what from a human point was logical, from what you might reasonably expect. He had persecuted the Christians – the followers of The Way as they were then called. Note the reaction of Ananias, a follower of Christ when he was told that he should go to Saul to restore his sight. He protests that this man has done great harm to the Christians in Jerusalem and would do the same in Damascus. But the Lord directly contradicts the thinking of Ananias and says that Paul is his chosen instrument. This I think contains great wisdom for us. What is going on in Saul's mind or Ananias' mind is of secondary importance. Then as today, the important issue is the choice, the initiative of God and we should all draw strength from that when we're discouraged or tempted to give up on things. The feelings that make us think in that way are transitory: they don't have the strength that comes from God's choice. And there's something more which contradicts our natural habit of mind. The Lord says that he will show Paul how much he must suffer in the Lord's name. It sounds almost vindictive, but no, Paul has been chosen to identify very closely with the suffering, crucified and risen Lord. To use a phrase that Paul himself used in the depth of this own experience of mission, Paul was chosen to make up what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Paul like all Christians, like all members of the Body of Christ, must suffer and so make his contribution to the redemption of the world.

Let me put this in the words of Pope Benedict in his homily at St Paul's Basilica two years ago.

“The Church's action is credible and effective only to the extent to which those who belong to her are prepared to pay in person for their fidelity to Christ in every circumstance. When this readiness is lacking, the crucial argument of truth on which the Church herself depends, is also absent.

Dear brothers and sisters, as in early times, today too Christ needs apostles ready to sacrifice themselves. He needs witnesses and martyrs like St Paul. Paul, a former violent

persecutor of Christians, when he fell to the ground, dazzled by the divine light on the road to Damascus, did not hesitate to change sides to the Crucified One and followed him without second thoughts. He lived and worked for Christ, for him he suffered and died. How timely his example is today.”

God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His choices are not our choices and that is crucial for understanding the mystery of our faith which Paul explored so deeply. Personal choice which is so central in our culture is an entirely secondary consideration within the providence of God.

But what of St Paul himself? In the second reading we have the story of the conversion from St Paul's point of view. What is interesting is that his view of himself and his calling is based on his experience of what the Lord has done in him, to him and for him. He understands that from his birth he has been set apart for this work. God set him apart, isolated him for a specific purpose and Paul himself accepts and explores that isolation. He doesn't resent it. He lives within the framework of God's plan for him. And the message he preaches is not in its essence, his own insights and ideas, rather it is based on God's revelation to him. Paul communicates what he has received from God. And yet, even though God's revelation of himself finished with the death of the Apostles, it remains the case that the public, definitive revelation of God is communicated to us individually in ways which are fresh and personal but also consistent and in continuity with the teaching given to the Apostles. God reveals himself in every generation in a way that is always consistent but always living and developing.

So let us take heart and be confident that we who are called to be the Church here in Kent and South London, a wonderful part of the world, are called to communicate Christ with all the freshness that goes with communicating a personal blessing. I hope we'll go away today confident that we're called, chosen by God, and able to see the difficulties and problems that come our way simply as the necessary and inevitable path that we must tread in order to fulfil God's purposes.

What has struck me in the Pope's catechesis on St Paul is the way he holds together, holds in tension, two vital truths. One is the fact that Paul is a universal figure. He was the Apostle of the Gentiles who preached Jesus Christ to those who were not Jews, who travelled in the Middle East and in Europe bringing a faith that would eventually reach every continent and every land uniting humanity in Catholic communion in a unity expressed through our communion with the Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict. And yet that very public dimension of St Paul is rooted, as I have said, in an experience that was unique and personal. Pope Benedict expresses it beautifully in these words in his address inaugurating the Pauline Year which are quoted in your booklet. He says:

“We are gathered here to ask ourselves about the Great Apostle of the Gentiles. We ask ourselves not just who Paul was, but above all who he is. His faith was the experience of being loved by Jesus Christ with an entirely personal love; it was an awareness of the fact that Christ faced death not for some unidentified cause but for the love of him – of Paul – and that being risen, he loves him still. Christ gave himself for him. His faith was not a theory, an opinion of God and the world. His faith was the impact of God's love on his heart. And so this faith was love for Jesus Christ.”

So let us take heart, take courage, cling to Jesus our Saviour, love him and be faithful to him. And if we feel we don't know how to do this, the letters of St Paul will always be a source of light and wisdom for us. And we take this into the future, into all our enterprises as individuals, agencies, parishes, schools, as deaneries and as a Diocese. In love we can pray together “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!”