

**Southwark Diocesan Gathering at Aylesford Priory to celebrate The Year of Saint Paul  
Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

**Homily given by Father John O'Toole at the Celebration of the Word of God**

Endings can also be beginnings – so as we draw very near to the end of the Year of St Paul let me re-echo what Archbishop Kevin said in his homily at Mass earlier today – and particularly his call and encouragement to us to read – or to continue to read - the letters of St Paul. **Why** should we read Paul's letters? Because not only are they a **WINDOW** into another world but they are a **MIRROR** in which we see ourselves and other people. But **how** should we read them and **where** should we start? Let me suggest not with the letter to the Romans – even though it is from that letter that our first reading for this afternoon's liturgy was taken. Romans is an excellent and a meaty letter but it is the longest of all Paul's letters and a weighty one. I would suggest starting with the letter to the Philippians which is a much shorter letter (only 4 pages long) and a warm and affectionate one. It is a good 'taster' for moving on to Paul's other letters, including Romans which was probably the last letter that Paul wrote.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew we heard once again the famous account of Jesus' Beatitudes which have been described as the heart of his teaching and as 'the 'gospel within the gospel.' I must admit that I was rather surprised to find that Paul makes no mention of the Beatitudes in any of his letters. And then it suddenly dawned on me that all of Paul's letters were written **before** the Gospels. In our copies of the Bible and the New Testament the gospels come before the letters but in reality they were written the other way round. The letters were written **before** the gospels and, in fact, Paul's letters are the earliest writings of all the New Testament – which is precisely why Paul is so important as the first Christian thinker and theologian. But before the gospels were written, and even before the letters were written, the gospel message itself was being preached and passed on by the first Christians by the witness of their actions and by their words – with the lived and preached word always coming before the written word. And the same is true today. As is so rightly, said - we ourselves may be the only gospel that people will ever meet. The gospel has been passed on to us and we are called in our turn to pass it on to others by our deeds and by our words.

Let me briefly suggest three words that come to us from Paul himself and which run through all his letters. They sum up and take us to the heart of Paul's own teaching about Christ – and the three words are gospel, grace and love.

**First**, the word gospel or good news. For Paul the gospel is not simply good advice it is good news. It is the power of God at work in us as individuals and as a community – but not just us. The Risen Lord is the Lord of all. Paul says in the first chapter of the letter to the Romans that the gospel is the power of salvation for anyone who has faith, to the Jews first but also to the Gentiles. The gospel is not just for some or for many but for all.

**Secondly**, the word grace. For Paul grace is the amazing free gift of God's love. This is the amazing grace which inspired that great hymn. This grace is always gift and never reward. It is freely offered to us – with God always taking the initiative and reaching out to us inviting a free response of faith and love on our part. God's steady Yes to us invites even an unsteady yes from us in response.

And **thirdly**, the word love – since as Paul says in that most-loved of all Paul's writings, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians – "and the greatest of these is love." For Paul this means God's love which has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the free gift of God's Holy Spirit. Because we are loved we are engraced and empowered to follow Christ's law of love – by loving God and by loving our neighbour as ourself. But as with our desire to read the letters of St Paul we want to know how to begin and where to start – so with Christ's commandment of love we again want to know how to begin and where to start.

To help us with this, I'd now like to invite our group of students from St Paul's Academy, currently in Plumstead and shortly to move to Abbey Wood, to lead us in a reflection on how, in the spirit of their patron St Paul, we try to live out and be faithful to the teaching of Christ given to us in the Beatitudes.