

Parish Priest's Annual Report 2009

It is extraordinary how the time goes by; and just a little bit scary. This is my third annual report to St Paul's and it seems only yesterday that I was unpacking cardboard boxes and moving in. Yet here we are, two and a bit years on.

It's been a busy year in many ways. We've just come out of Holy Week and, speaking for myself, one of the best for many years. First, I've been thrilled at the general level of attendance on all days. The services on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were exceptionally good; but the great Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday were also really encouraging. Even Holy Saturday, which is sometimes the Cinderella of the Triduum, was much better supported than in recent years. And as for Easter Sunday, I don't think anyone was prepared for the crowd we had. We must maintain that momentum and continue to witness to Christ in an increasingly secular world and in changing times.

But if Easter is the great climax of the liturgical year, there have been other great occasions to celebrate in the last twelve months. Chief among them can only be the Ordination to the Priesthood of Fr James. He came to us as a deacon nearly two years ago and swiftly established himself as a super colleague: reliable, diligent and prayerful. After his year as a Deacon, Bishop Peter came to ordain him to the priesthood on the Feast of St Peter and Paul. His First Mass followed the day after. It is always a huge joy and privilege to be part of the beginning of a priestly ministry and we continue to pray that Fr James ministry will be blessed for many years to come.

It was good, too, that he was able to celebrate his First Mass on our New Altar. The Altar stone itself is not new, coming as it does from the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. Restored and polished it looks splendid in its new setting and it was good to have Bp Peter here to consecrate it just before Fr James' ordination.

But any year is a mixture of good and bad and there have been some difficult times. I think particularly of just over a year ago when our parish family was directly affected by dreadful and murderous violence, forcing us to reflect on

the ways in which humans can harm each other and how we as Christians must speak out against it.

On a personal note, the loss of my own mother had and has an even deeper impact than I could ever have realised and I will always be grateful for the support that so many of gave at the time. Once again, I thank you for that.

But what of the future? Where next in our pilgrimage? I always used to shudder when people talked about 'vision' as in 'what is your vision?' or 'What is your vision for the parish?' And I often struggled to respond coherently to the question. But two and a bit years has enabled me to reflect at greater length. If you were to ask me now, I would say this: I hope that St Paul's will continue to grow, but in a number of ways. Not only numerically, but also in holiness.

One of the things I greatly appreciate about Tottenham in general and St Paul's in particular is that worship is important to us, God is important to us, being a disciple is important to us. That is one of the greatest building blocks in our life together and will, I am sure continue to be the solid rock on which we are founded.

But what about 'growing in holiness'? By this I mean that we continue to grow in God's love. Scripture tells us that God is love. If we are made in his image and likeness it follows that we are called to be love too.

Our own patron, St Paul, himself speaks of love: If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames,^[b] but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.'

So we are called to be a people of love. And we should be constantly on our guard against anything that falls short of that. We bear with each other; we

should not be rude to each other; we should not harbour ill-feeling towards one another or be prejudiced against each other, and prejudice can take many subtle forms: as Jesus came to tear down the barrier between Jew and Greek, bond or free, so he came to tear down the barriers between black and white, and between Caribbean and African.

We are called to be *people of prayer*: Jesus tells us to pray always. Now this might seem impossible. How can we pray always? Well this all depends on how we understand prayer. We can't spend 24 hours a day on our knees. We need to eat, we need to work, we need to rest, we need to sleep. But prayer is more than all of this. Prayer is about being aware of the presence of God in our lives all the time and that we are in his presence all the time. Not like Big Brother, spying on us. No, his love, his Being surrounds us, infuses us, knocks gently at the door of our lives, asking to be let in. So listen to him, stop listening to the clamour of our own egos, listen to him and realise that you are walking with him and he walks with you. When you are shopping, cooking at the computer, stop for a just a moment, and give thanks for the presence of God with you there. So prayer is not just about words or trying to form pious thoughts: it is about turning yourselves towards God who is always turned towards you.

We are called to be people of action: we walk with Jesus, yes, and we work for him, too. If our lives are centred on worship and prayer, and lived in love, then it will bear fruit in action, in service of our neighbour, and of the stranger visiting for the first time, of old and young alike.

So, people of love. People of prayer. People of action and service. This is what Jesus calls us to. To such a call there can be only one answer: Yes, Lord, you know I love you.