



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

WHO WAS SAINT PAUL?

The popular picture

Perhaps you haven't thought much about who Paul was – he is the chap who's always mentioned as writing those difficult letters! If you went to a traditional school or Sunday School you might have learned about his missionary journeys. There are many who will blame him for all that they see wrong in Christianity: he is the one who made the simple, life-affirming message of Jesus into a complicated religion obsessed with sin; oppressive of women, violent against homosexuals; all in all not the sort of person you would like to meet on a dark street! How much of this is true?

A brief history

We know more about Paul's life than anyone else in the New Testament except Jesus himself. His proper name was Saul, his Jewish name, but he was also born a Roman citizen (a mark of some privilege in the family) and used the Roman name Paul when he was in non-Jewish circles. He was born in Tarsus in modern day Turkey. He was a Jew of what was called the *Diaspora* or scattering: Jews living outside Palestine (possibly the majority by then), but he went to Jerusalem and studied under the great Jewish sage, Gamaliel.

Paul does not seem to have met Jesus in his lifetime, but was deeply disturbed by the early Christian movement and persecuted it. Clearly he saw it as an affront to traditional Judaism. But his life was turned round by an event on a journey to Damascus when he claimed to have met the risen Jesus; and from a persecutor he became a leader of the early Christians.

In many ways Paul was a marginal figure in first generation Christianity. Most Christians were Jews, and Paul worked with those who were taking the gospel to Diaspora Jews and (the really radical bit) to Gentiles without requiring them to submit to the Jewish way of life. Paul did not begin this move but he became its chief proponent and defender.

The Acts of the Apostles is based largely round Paul's career (we hear almost nothing of the many other leaders of early Christianity which is a pity). The book leaves him in Rome where he later died in a persecution under the Emperor Nero in 64AD.

Paul's letters

Paul founded a large number of churches in present day Cyprus, Turkey and Greece and kept up contact and supervision of them by letter. The surviving letters in the New Testament are only a handful from his correspondence and of course we lack the letters from the churches to which he was responding. So the letters represent, as it were, fragments of conversations. But they are precious documents from the very earliest days of Christianity, far earlier than the gospels. I Corinthians 11 and 15 give us the earliest summary accounts of the Last Supper and the Resurrection of Jesus, as they had been taught to Paul only a decade or so after the event.

Romans	A letter introducing Paul to the church in Rome, setting out his ideas. This is the most systematic – and difficult – of all Paul's letters
1 and 2 Corinthians	The church in Corinth was a nest of problems for Paul. These two letters are only part of a long and difficult correspondence.
Galatians	Paul faced many opponents, even among his fellow Christians who did not accept that Gentiles were not bound to keep the Jewish Law. Here he attacks his opponents (quite viciously) and fights for the loyalty of the church he founded.
Ephesians	A letter, seemingly based on Colossians, which may not be by Paul himself (one of his staff 'ghost wrote' it?)
Philippians	A personal letter to a very supportive church in which Paul comes across as more serene in his older years.
Colossians	A letter to a church with which Paul is less familiar, gently giving directions on their way ahead.
1 Thessalonians	The church in Thessaloniki was agitated by speculation about the end of the world. Paul tries to quiet them down.
2 Thessalonians	Continues the discussion. Again a 'ghost written' letter rather than from Paul personally?
1 and 2 Timothy, Titus	These letters are attributed to Paul by 'pious fiction'. They come from the next generation of Christians establishing the ground rules of a developing Church.
Philemon	The only surviving letter from Paul to a single individual, thanking Philemon for his help and asking him to free a slave, Onesimus.



The world of Paul's travels and the churches to which he wrote

What is important in Paul?

Paul saw Jesus as the Messiah – the Christ – fulfilling and redefining all the landmarks of Jewish religion. The one God is now seen as ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’; God’s covenant with Israel is now through Christ a covenant with all humanity; the Law still points out the existence of sin but now God’s people are recognised as those who put their faith in Christ rather than those who live within the ambit of the Torah; and the Temple as the focus of holiness has been replaced by the image of the body of Christ. Obviously Paul saw Jesus Christ as central to all this and he clearly saw him as more than just a human figure, but he was by no means the only Christian who did so (Matthew... John...)

His universalism: From the moment he met the risen Christ Paul preached the love of God not just to the Jews as his people but to all humanity, and he saw Jesus Christ as the key moment of this revelation of God’s love.

Justification by faith: Judaism was never a religion in which people tried to ‘earn’ God’s favour and love; but down the centuries Paul’s attack on ‘works of the law’ (which was really about whether one has to adopt Jewish identity to be a Christian) has been broadened out to emphasise God’s free forgiving love for all of us.

Romans 3.28-29: *‘A person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only. Is he not the God of Gentiles also?’*

Romans 5.8: *‘God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.’*

Understanding the human predicament

Romans 7.15-25: *'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'*

It is not straightforward what Paul himself meant by this passage. (He is not being autobiographical; he may have been speaking about Adam!) But over the centuries it has come to represent the human dilemma, our inability to achieve our own ideals. For Paul the answer is to appeal with thanksgiving to the sure mercy of God. But over the centuries, especially in Western Christianity (but not in Eastern Orthodoxy) it has grown into a rather bleak view of human nature. It is a hard thing: how do we hold on to the best that is human and not be in denial of the worst?

Misogynist or egalitarian?

Sometimes Paul appears to have a real down on women (1 Corinthians 11.2-15; Ephesians 5.21-33). Elsewhere he sounds radically egalitarian (Galatians 3.28: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*; also 1 Corinthians 7.2-4) It looks as if Paul was egalitarian in principle but not wanting fragile churches to offend conservative society. For the same reason he was no critic of slavery.

And some famous Pauline passages...

1 Corinthians 13: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love...*

Perhaps the most familiar piece of Paul's writings, the 'hymn to love' is a classic piece of his poetic style. While Jesus stirred his hearers with parables, Paul moved his readers with hymnodic praise of virtue. Likewise we read:

Romans 12.9-21: *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit ...*

Galatians 5.22: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.*

Philippians 4.8-9: *Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things ... and the God of peace will be with you.*

2 Corinthians 13.13: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.*

So easily a passage from Paul becomes a prayer and this farewell at the end of a letter has become the prayer by which many a service or meeting is concluded in the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.