

SAINTS PETER AND PAUL: MISSIONARIES AND EVANGELISTS

Acts 12. 1-11

2 Timothy 4. 6-8, 17-18

Matthew 16. 13-19

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, we have the honour of celebrating the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. When you think about it, it's rather strange that they should share the same feast day: they were very different people, after all, a bit of an odd couple. If it were left to us to choose the two saints with whom we would most like to live, it is highly improbable that we would choose these two. Of course, they owe their fame in the Church to the apostolic ministries to which God called them. But the New Testament allows us to get to know them rather well, and the personalities we get to know are not really very likeable!

We know St Paul's personality perhaps as well as that of any person in the ancient world, and we know it because of what he has revealed of himself in his letters. Of course, it is possible to draw up a list of attractive things about Paul from his letters; but a list of the unattractive things would be just as long, or even longer. Paul is impatient, manipulative, hot-tempered, argumentative, ungenerous to those who disagree with him, abusive and petulant.

St Peter we know almost as well, though more from what others say about him in the New Testament. It is surprising that someone who has such a prominent role in the New Testament should be given such a bad press there. Peter is impetuous, boastful, thin-skinned and irresolute. He bragged that he would never deny our Lord, yet on the same night he denied him three times (John 18. 15-27). When Jesus gently reminded Peter of this incident later on by the Sea of Tiberias, he took offence

(John 21.15-17). And as the early Church grew, Paul was obliged to confront Peter face-to-face for his habit of saying one thing to one group of people, and the opposite to another (Galatians 2.11-14).

Paul and Peter are a curious pair, then, to be hailed as princes of the Apostles and foundation stones of the Church.

I don't think that either Peter or Paul would be very pleased with the place and the honour we give them in the church today. We see them as founding apostles, and yet they would not recognise that title. Yes, they certainly saw themselves as being 'sent'. Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians by saying that he has been 'called an apostle' (1. 1). That is to say that he was called by Christ in the conversion experience that changed his life on the road to Damascus; and that he has been 'sent out' to bring the news that salvation is to be found in the person of Jesus. You probably know that the word apostle means 'one who is sent'. So Paul is saying that the Lord has sent him when he uses the word apostle. It is not a job title, and neither is it a job description; it is more a statement of fact.

Peter has been 'sent', too. After the resurrection of Christ, Peter is told by the Lord 'to feed my lambs and feed my sheep'. Thus the Risen Jesus commissions Peter just like Paul was sent. I am sure that they both saw themselves as missionaries, not as people who put down foundations, let alone being considered *as* foundations. For them and for us, it is Christ who is the foundation of the Church.

Even though Peter (meaning 'rock') is the name given by our Lord to Simon, and even though Jesus tells us in today's gospel that he will build his Church on this rock, Peter proves not to be a very good foundation stone. He denies Christ three times as we know, but he reaffirms his love for our Lord three times as well. Peter's foundation is Jesus himself because he has the insight to see Christ for who he really is: the son of the living God.

For Paul, the foundation of his conversion is seeing that the place where salvation is to be found is not in the Law, but in Jesus himself. So much so, in fact, that Paul wants to ‘put him on’, and says that it is no longer he that lives, but it is Christ who lives in him.

This feast is a good day for us to see how we are doing as a church, as a parish and as individuals. The engagement of Peter and Paul with our Lord inspired them to go out to the world. Initially (and especially in Peter’s case) they went to the Jewish people, but eventually they went to the entire known world of the time. For them being a disciple of Christ wasn’t only about forming a community of followers of Jesus. They were driven to tell others of the *joy and peace* that came with the message of our Lord’s resurrection. They wanted to tell the world about the *hope* that had been given to them in the forgiveness of sins.

Nowadays Peter and Paul inspire us by their example to be outward-looking and to realise the truth that if we become an inward-looking church, only concerned about our future or our past, then we are likely to die out. The Word that both these apostles preached is a *living Word* and it is precisely *that Word* that gives life to our community today.

The successors of the apostles are challenged to find new ways of being like Peter and Paul. How easy it is to become disheartened by the changes in our world. We can sit at home and bemoan the closing of churches, smaller congregations and blame it on demographics or secularisation; or we can think of *new ways* of doing what Jesus did when he reached out to the poor and to those who were lost. The work of evangelisation, of spreading the good news, is still there to be done, probably more so than ever before.

Personally, I am deeply moved by the missionary and preaching life of Peter and Paul. For me they are missionaries who planted the Word of God far from home and ultimately gave their lives because they followed the teaching of the Lord and preached it to others. When the sense of mission is lost in a church community, then numbers dwindle and the parish declines; and we become museum-keepers rather than evangelisers.

It is helpful for us to remember that many of the churches that Paul and Peter founded, especially in present-day Turkey, no longer exist. Yet because of their preaching and missionary activity, the gospel message has spread around the world. The Word grows even if the buildings fall.

Are we able to say (like Peter) that Jesus is the Son of the living God? If we are, why don't we want to tell others about this good news? Surely it should be shared and not kept secret. Otherwise we might not be able to say (like Paul at the end of his life) that we have fought the good fight to the end.

May we all be encouraged and enthused with missionary zeal by St Peter and St Paul!

Amen.