

## SERMON/REFLECTIONS SS PETER & PAUL (tr.) SUNDAY 28 JUNE 2020

What do we know about S. Peter? He was a fisherman who became one of Jesus' first disciples. He was often the spokesman for the group of disciples, as today's gospel reading indicates. Sometimes he spoke without realising the implications of what he was saying. This is shown most starkly at the end of Jesus' life, when Peter first declared he would be with Jesus whatever happened, and then denied three times that he knew him. However, he was a witness of the resurrection, and Jesus gave him a particular responsibility in caring for the Christian community: remember the walk along the shore of Galilee described in the last chapter of John's gospel, when Jesus commands Peter, "Feed my sheep." The first half of the book of *Acts* shows his prominent place in the life of the infant church.

What do we know about S. Paul? An educated Pharisee, at first he persecuted Christians – he approved of the stoning of Stephen, for example. He had a vision of the risen Christ as he was travelling to Damascus, and soon became an articulate proclaimer of the gospel. His particular calling, recognised by others after some reservations, was to spread the gospel among the Gentiles of the Mediterranean world. He wrote a number of letters to the churches he had played a major part in establishing on his travels.

What do we know about Peter and Paul in relation to each other? Basically, they didn't always get on. Paul criticised Peter at Antioch when he withdrew from sharing meals with Gentiles in order to avoid upsetting a recently arrived group of Jewish Christians. 'Criticised' is perhaps too gentle a word. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians (2.11), 'I opposed him to his face.' But Paul can be criticised for inconsistency. In *Acts* (16.3) we read that Paul wanted the younger Christian Timothy to accompany him on his travels, so had him circumcised to avoid upsetting the Jews in various places, who knew that Timothy's father was a Greek. Timothy's feelings on the matter are not recorded. In one of the letters that bear his name (2 Peter 3.16) Peter gets a dig at Paul, writing that there are some things in Paul's letters that are hard to understand.

What can we learn from all this? First that God holds out to all people the possibility of change, conversion, repentance and forgiveness. Each of us has a different past – our backgrounds, upbringings and life stories – but God's grace is available to all, just as it worked in the diverse lives of Peter and Paul.

The second thing is that the God, acting through the church, brings together unlikely co-workers, who may differ in temperament and outlook. The differences between Peter and Paul mattered much less than what they had in common: a commitment to following Jesus, making him known, and building up the church. There's a good example of how they were 'pulling in the same direction' in the book of *Acts*. Although S. Paul became the 'Apostle to the Gentiles' (see 9.15 and 15.12), it was S. Peter who became convinced that it was right to baptise the Gentile Cornelius (10.44-48) before Paul's missionary efforts had started. There's absolutely no evidence that at that stage they had consulted on a 'common strategy', to use a modern phrase. Their common strategy was the Holy Spirit. The church today can benefit from acting on the insights and supporting the efforts coming from a variety of its members, rather than following a narrow 'party line'.

The third point follows directly. We often hear that the church, or society in general, should 'celebrate diversity.' I go along with that, but I'd take it further. Diversity is actually at the heart of the church. S. Paul portrays the church as a body whose members differ from one another but work for the good of the whole body (1 Cor. 12). The different gifts members have are described in the first letter of S. Peter (1 Pet. 4.10,11). A joint feast day developed for these two apostles by a happy historical coincidence. There is reasonable evidence that their mortal remains were brought to Rome on 29 June in the year 258, two centuries after their earthly encounters. Diversity amongst church members, so long as it serves the gospel and responds to the Holy Spirit, is a foundational strength, much more powerful than uniformity. It is open to growth and the contributions of newcomers. It is not threatened by change, and we are facing change at the present time. It can even lead us deeper into the mystery of God, who is one God in three persons. But that's another sermon. For now let us thank God for the work of his grace in the lives of Peter and Paul, for the blessing he brought to the church through them, and pray for his grace and blessing in our life today.