

**St Augustine's Church, Bayswater, June 28, 2020**

**JOHN 21:15-22**

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*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

Good morning everybody.

Today we are gathered to celebrate the lives, and remember the deaths, of two great saints of the early church. Well, the feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul falls tomorrow, the 29<sup>th</sup>, but today is close enough!

We've heard in today's readings a little about the lives of these two saints.

Saint Peter was, of course, one of the earliest followers of Jesus. I'm sure we all know the story of Peter's calling to follow Jesus, on the shore of Lake Galilee. The two fishermen, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, left the existence they had eked out through their trade, and followed the call of Jesus. (Mk 1:16-20)

As for Saint Paul, he was a pivotal figure in the establishment of our faith – of Christianity and of the Church. Paul's letters form a large part of the New Testament, and they are also its earliest documents. First Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters – it dates to around the year 50, at least fifteen years before the first Gospel, Mark, was written.

It might surprise you to learn that some of the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament were written long after his death – including Second Timothy, which we heard from today. Yet perhaps it is a testament to Paul's influence that Christians, decades later, still wished to speak through his voice.

Peter and Paul knew each other well – if you've read Acts, or Paul's Letter to the Galatians, you'll hear of their discussions and, at times, disagreements.

It's important to remember that the first followers of Jesus were Jewish – and thought of themselves as Jewish. During the time of Peter and Paul, the term Christian didn't exist yet. One of the earliest disagreements among those who followed Jesus concerned non-Jewish, gentile converts – people who had previously followed pagan religions – and whether they should be required to follow the Jewish law. The New Testament tells us quite a lot about this discussion; Paul's letters tell us that he and Peter disagreed strongly on the issue. And yet, as we all know, and as the Book of Acts tells us, eventually the community discerned a path forward.

And that path forward, trodden by Peter and Paul and other women and men whose names are less famous, or entirely lost to us, built the Church that we know today. The Holy and Catholic, universal church, which we witness to when we say the creeds, and of which the Anglican Communion forms a part, alongside our sisters and brothers in, to name a few, the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian traditions. The Holy and Catholic church which includes all who walk with Christ.

In that spirit, perhaps it might be good to talk about what we can see in common between Peter and Paul. When we look to their calling, to the lives they lived, to their ministry, I believe we can learn about God. Studying the lives of these two saints helps us to see God: a God who surprises.

When we think of ‘saints’, perhaps sometimes it’s tempting to think of those people as somehow different; less sinful, perhaps closer to God than we are. A bit more holy. Maybe, in an odd way, a little bit less human. Sometimes it is tempting to think of clergy, of priests, bishops and deacons, in the same way – but then of course, you meet them!

All jokes aside, we know that Paul was an early persecutor of those who believed in and followed Jesus Christ; of those who had witnessed the resurrection, and who were called to share the Good News.

We know that Peter, called to follow Jesus, struggled to understand the teachings of his Lord. Peter, along with many of the disciples, did not understand and could not accept that the Messiah – the son of God, who had entered into the world to save all of us – must endure a shameful and humiliating death. As the Gospels tell us, it was Peter who denied Jesus three times. And then the rooster crowed.

And yet: these are the people who Jesus called. Simon became Peter, the rock, upon whom the church was built. And Paul, a violent persecutor of Christians, had a personal experience of Jesus on the road to Damascus, and became a theologian and an evangelist.

It’s surprising, isn’t it, that Peter, having denied Jesus three times, having fled Jerusalem, returned, and followed his calling, leading and building the church.

It’s surprising that Paul, hearing the voice of our Lord Jesus saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”, immediately recognised the divine authority of that voice, and followed his Lord.

As long as there has been a humanity, we have prayed. Two thousand years ago, the people of Judea prayed, asking for God’s help. And God answered. But who, praying for God’s help, could have imagined that God’s answer would be to send God’s only son into the world?

And yet that is what God did. Jesus brought us a message of peace and hope, the Good News which endures from generation to generation.

It’s surprising.

I’ve just spent some weeks at my first placement as a theological student, at the John Wollaston Chapel, at our college out in Bold Park. It’s been an interesting experience. There have been ample opportunities for education – for discussions about theology and ecclesiology and soteriology and lots of other complicated things named with long Greek words. And yet, I am so glad to be back here, in a parish church. I think, on reflection, that you see God at God’s most surprising here: and God is much harder to see in a congregation of a dozen theological students on their best behaviour, trying their best to do everything just so.

We are, each of us, here because we have heard and answered a call from our God, through Jesus Christ, to be here. And we are none of us perfect: but if there's something we can learn from the example of Peter and Paul, it is that our imperfection poses no problem to God.

We aren't called to perfection, but we are called to live lives of faith, and to follow our Lord and saviour as best we can. So perhaps Peter and Paul provide us with a bit of perspective when we make mistakes on a Sunday morning, when a hymn lands a bit flat, or we do things in the wrong order, or when some other thing goes wrong. Perhaps, in an odd, surprising sort of way, those things, those imperfections, help us to see God when we are gathered together.

Another of the famous saints, Augustine of Hippo, preached on this day, and reflected that Peter and Paul had walked alongside each other, on a holy path. Augustine's words are 1600 years old. I'll now read the closing of his sermon, which perhaps we might consider a prayer.

Let us pray.

“It is a narrow, stony, hard road we tread, and yet with so many gone before us, we shall find the way smoother. The Lord himself trod this way, the unshakeable apostles and the holy martyrs likewise. So let us celebrate this feast day made holy by the blood of these two apostles. Let us embrace their faith, their life, their labours, their sufferings, their preaching, and their teaching.”

*Amen.*