

## Saints Peter & Paul – C

The way our liturgical calendar works out this year, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul supersedes what would otherwise have been the 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – hence the incense, lighting all six candles at the altar, to give it just this celebration of the Mass a little extra solemnity.

Saints Peter and Paul share this feast day because of their dual role in evangelization the world after Jesus ascended into heaven. Two very different men but who were both chosen and called by God to play such an important role in the spread of Christianity. Peter, a humble fisherman and a Jew, who was called by Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry and was one part of Jesus' inner circle of three apostles, the other two being the brothers James and John. Peter is mentioned more than all the other apostles combined in the Gospels and was the first one to make a public profession of

faith in Jesus as the Messiah, although his understanding of who the Messiah was supposed to be was still flawed and limited. And for this public proclamation of faith in him, as we hear in our Gospel reading today, Jesus says to him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this you, but my Heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

I just quoted to you half of today’s Gospel reading for a reason, because I want to emphasize how important these words of Jesus to Peter are, and because of the singular, unique role Jesus confers on Peter with these words. First, he gives him a new name: Peter, or *kepha* in Aramaic, a name meaning *rock*. “And on this rock I will build my church,” he adds. Jesus then tells Peter that he will give

him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. This is a reference going back to the kingdom of David, when the second most powerful person in the kingdom, after the king himself, was the royal steward, the one who had possession of the keys to the palace.

Peter of course was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night Jesus was arrested; but his weak, flawed human nature, which manifested itself multiple times in the Gospels, was most evident when Peter denied Jesus three times, and then fled in shame and fear, not even present when Jesus died on the Cross.

And yet Jesus chose Peter to lead his Church here on earth in its earliest days, even though he knew just how flawed and weak he was. Of course, Jesus saw the good qualities in Peter as well – and no doubt he chose Peter both for the good that he saw in him, but also because of his weakness. Jesus intentionally did not choose the most powerful, intelligent, or athletic man of his time, but rather a weak, flawed man of humble origins, although one who still

possessed strength of character and faith – we might say that nowadays that Jesus saw the “potential” in Peter. And as we hear elsewhere in Scripture: “The Lord chooses the weak and makes them strong,” and, “God’s strength is manifested in weakness.”

Whereas Peter primarily evangelized Jewish communities, Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles. Again, Paul was very different from Peter. Paul was not a disciple of Jesus during his life on earth; in fact, as a Pharisee, he was no doubt part of the majority of Pharisees who were suspicious and critical of Jesus. Elsewhere in the Acts of the Apostles we hear how he was present at, and approved of, if not instigated, the martyrdom of Stephen, the first martyr of Christianity, and how he was known for his zeal in persecuting Christians.

But, in spite of his deep flaws, Jesus chose him – again, Jesus saw in him the potential for greatness in service of the Lord Jesus. This is a reminder to us that even the people we consider to be

perhaps our greatest enemies, or the greatest enemies of Christianity, have (God-given) gifts – at the very least a kernel of good in them – which, if they were to turn to Christ, could make them great servants of the Lord and His Church. Paul's zeal – previously directed towards the persecution of Christians – after his conversion compelled him to proclaim the Gospel of Christ far and wide with great fervor, in spite of great hardship.

In our first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the account of Peter's dramatic rescue from imprisonment and what would have been certain death on Herod's orders. We heard how James the Apostle had himself just been martyred. And simply because this had been pleasing to the Jewish leaders, Herod had ordered Peter arrested and imprisoned as well. Luke includes an interesting little detail in this account which might be easy to overlook. He adds almost as an aside that Peter was arrested during the feast of Unleavened Bread, or Passover. In this, Peter's life is

imitating that of Christ, who was himself arrested and imprisoned during Passover.

And Luke also tells us that the Christian community of faith was praying for Peter very fervently. And this leads to this dramatic rescue of Peter which Luke relates to us in this reading. Even though Peter is locked in a prison cell, “under the guard of four squadrons of four soldiers each” – 16 soldiers! – and he is in “double chains”, sleeping between two guards, with two more standing outside the prison, an angel comes and frees him. The chains just fall off him, the soldiers don’t wake up, the cell door and then the prison door just open on their own, and Peter goes out into the nighttime city, again a free man, to continue to serve the Lord and spread the Gospel. So if God wills it, it can and will happen – it doesn’t matter what human beings or even nature does to prevent it, because nothing is more powerful than God, the creator and the sovereign of all that is. And it was God’s will that Peter continue to spread the

Gospel – it was not yet the time for Peter to give up his life for the Lord.

Which in due course did happen, to both him and to Paul. These two great apostles and evangelists, and Peter himself of course being our first pope, both of them a few years later gave the greatest witness of their faith in Jesus Christ by dying as martyrs for him in the great imperial city of Rome. And for their unique and important roles in the history of our Church, and for their holy deaths, we give them special honor today. And in honoring them, we also give praise to God.

Like Peter and Paul, each one of us here today has been called by God to love and serve Him, to do our own part in sharing God's love with others and spreading the good news of salvation. God has given each one of us gifts and talents, especially for the purpose of serving him and thus leading more people to Him. How might God

be calling us to serve him in our lives, and how might He be calling us to serve Him today?

- **June 29, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**