

Feast of Ss Peter & Paul **29 June 2008**

Peter and Paul each have their own feast day, but today we commemorate the two apostles together because of the ancient tradition that they were martyred in Rome on the same day in 64 A.D under the Emperor Nero. Legend has it that Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded, and that Peter was crucified, but upside down because he felt unworthy to share the same manner of death as Jesus. In recognition that Peter and Paul were the two leading figures of apostolic times we are invited, on this saint's day they share, to consider them together. While Peter and Paul had much in common they were very different people indeed, who became apostles in quite different ways.

Peter was chosen by Jesus and accompanied him throughout his earthly ministry. Paul, who never knew Jesus in the flesh, was dramatically converted on his way to Damascus by the Risen Lord. Peter received the Holy Spirit with the other disciples at Pentecost, Paul from the laying on of hands. Peter was a fisherman. Paul was a scholar. Peter was married. Paul was single. Peter was an uncomplicated impulsive person. Paul was a thinker, a philosopher.

Both men were given new names to demonstrate they had each been made a new person in Christ. Both engaged in missionary activity. Both travelled extensively performing miracles of healing and spreading the good news. But Peter and Paul fundamentally disagreed with one another over whether a person had to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian, i.e. whether circumcision was necessary for salvation. For Peter the answer was "yes" and for Paul "no."

Peter and Paul were different from one another in background and temperament and disagreed in matters of opinion and practise. Yet they had one thing in common: they were united in their devotion to Jesus and in their missionary zeal to propagate the faith. Both confessed Jesus as the Son of God. And on the basis of their common faith in Jesus as Lord, they each committed their lives to following him, working to spread the good news, to renew the face of the earth.

What then have we to learn from the lives of saints Peter and Paul? First and foremost, that in spite of our differences, the one thing Christians have in common is our belief that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. And that he has given us the commission to go out into the world to proclaim the good news. That which unites us – our belief in Jesus as Lord, and his commission to witness that Christ is the answer to human need – is far more important than differences among us, even moral and doctrinal matters that divide Christians from one another. The Church of Jesus Christ is a loose-knit community of all types, people committed to Christ and to his vision of justice, peace and reconciliation, and the well being of all mankind. As Archbishop William Temple observed, the Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of non-members, for the redemption and well being of all people everywhere.

As for differences among us, we should relax and not be afraid of them – always seeing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The Anglican Communion at present is torn to the point of schism by sharp differences of opinion over gender and sexuality. Sadly, it has become a massive distraction from what the Church is supposed to be all about, bringing good news to a broken and disfigured world where people are suffering

and so many are lost and without hope. Division and conflict over doctrinal and moral issues have always been the stuff of church history. But we can only hope to resolve issues – in the interests of that unity Christ asks for his Church – not by excommunicating each other, but by patient and prayerful attempts to understand the other point of view, like Peter and Paul in their dispute over circumcision, and get on with the important business of witnessing to the love of Christ.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has said that when the church fails and divides something has been lost of its conviction that it is there for the sake of God's future. When the Church is fully itself, he says, it is because it has become transparent to the indwelling life of Jesus. In other words, where Jesus is visibly active in the world we can say that something very like the Church must be going on.

Lest we become disheartened by the present crisis in Anglican leadership, there are plenty of examples all around us where the Church is fully itself, where it is transparent to the indwelling life of Jesus. Look at the welfare agencies of the churches, our own Anglicare and Anglicord, at the Sacred Heart Mission not a mile from here where everyday over 400 lunches and countless breakfasts are served to the homeless. And the project of St Joseph's, South Yarra to provide emergency accommodation to the homeless; in case you think it's a wholly Catholic enterprise, every week boys from Melbourne Grammar come to clean the house. But it's not just the obvious example of welfare agencies and ecumenical partnerships where the Church is transparent to the life of Jesus. Through the various ministries of this community – as with so many other parishes and institutional chaplaincy services – numerous lives every week are touched by the love of Christ.

Differences among Christians abound – including strong differences of opinion. While differences of opinion ought to be aired and discussed, they should never distract us, or our church leaders, from acknowledging our unity in Christ and our collective mission to share in his work of the world's re-creation.

Peter and Paul embody what it is to be followers of Christ who, in spite of differences, work towards a common goal. Each of them dedicated his life to Jesus and to the building up of his body, the Church. The Collect for Ss Peter and Paul reminds us that even with their differences, these two apostles were “knit together in unity” by the Holy Spirit. May it be so with all of us who follow Jesus Christ.

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