



## FEAST OF STS. PETER AND PAUL—2008 YEAR “A”

JUNE 29, 2008 FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 12:1-11 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 17-18

MATTHEW 16:13-19

Whether it be in the mosaics of the great triumphal arch that separates the nave from the sanctuary of the Church of St. Paul’s outside the walls, or the larger than life statues that flank Bernini’s stairs that lead to the entrance of St. Peter’s Basilica, it seems inevitable that whenever you find St. Peter in Rome you also find St. Paul, and wherever you find St. Paul you also find St. Peter. These two great saints, pillars of the early Church, are forever bound together in the great city of Rome where it is said in they both met their deaths; Paul by the sword and Peter by an upside down crucifixion. Indeed each of the great churches dedicated to them are no more than a mile apart found on opposite sides of the Tiber River not far from its banks, each marking the spot where it is believed the two were buried in ancient necropolises after their martyrdom.

If we were to read through the four Gospels it would undoubtedly be Peter who stands out as the most important of the twelve Apostles. Jesus seems to make it clear that in spite of all his deficiencies Simon Peter is the Rock on which He plans to build His church. If on the other hand we were to read through the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, it is Paul’s name that we most often encounter, and his missionary journeys which clearly take first place. There is little doubt if we simply base our opinion on Scripture, Peter and Paul would have to be the most important, and influential men in the fledgling Church immediately following the Death and Resurrection of Christ, and their importance and influence continue to exercise importance until our very day.

Peter is an uneducated and unsophisticated fisherman from small town Galilee. He is at the same time an eager, extroverted, enthusiast, and a shy, cowardly man who often speaks before he thinks. He is a man full of contradictions, whose faults are ever before us and yet he is a man with whom most of us feel great empathy, and perhaps, because he reminds us of ourselves that we like him.

Paul on the other hand is an educated man, a Roman citizen who has been educated at the feet of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, and whose letters indicate that he was well aware of Greek philosophical thought. He was a zealot working to subdue and destroy the Christian cult of Judaism. Paul undergoes a tremendous transformation in his conversion, and considers

himself one of the Apostles because Christ has sent him to proclaim the Good News. Although all of his boasting is in Christ, he tends to our ear to sound proud and even arrogant. Many women tend to see him as a misogynist. And, despite the beauty and importance of much that he writes in his Epistles, many find him unlikeable.

As these very different men are bound together by the city of Rome, they are even more closely bound together by their faith in Christ. Each had a very personal experience of Christ, and that experience changed their lives completely. Had it not been for Christ, Peter would have remained an unknown fisherman in Galilee, but for three years he shared in Jesus' life and mission. He knew Jesus' tenderness and love, but he equally experienced His anger and disappointment. If the earthly Jesus changed his life, even more so was the transformation that resulted from his time with the risen Christ, and with the Holy Spirit sent by the Lord that gave him the power and the courage to preach the Good News and to face the opposition of both Jew and pagan alike. Paul was a Pharisee whose primary desire was to keep his Jewish faith free from incorrect thought. To that end he persecuted the Christians. But, he too knew from direct experience the call of the risen Christ and the transforming power of the Spirit. As different as these two men may have been in background and education, and as differently as the Spirit dealt with them as individuals they shared an unshakable faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ, and they shared it passionately.

That passion for Christ is revealed to us in this morning's readings. Peter is locked away by Herod who has already put James, John's brother to death by the sword. It is obvious that Peter is to face a similar fate, but as he is rescued from prison by an angel. He grows in the conviction of the truth of confession at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Paul has endured shipwrecks, beatings, and imprisonment for the sake of the Good News. In today's reading from his Letter to Timothy, Paul writes to Timothy from prison in Rome. He is aware that his days on this earth are numbered, yet he rejoices that God has seen fit to use him as an instrument of the Holy Spirit in bringing the Good News to the Gentiles. Just as Peter's confidence grows as he is rescued from his cell, Paul grows in his belief that God will rescue him in this life and reward him with eternal life.

Both these men had direct experiences of the risen Christ and were sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit as they passionately proclaimed Christ crucified and risen. Different as they were, Peter and Paul knew each other, spending time together in both Jerusalem and Antioch before they came to Rome. It was in Rome in 64 AD that Peter met his death as a martyr, only to be followed by Paul in 67 AD. We do not know what, if any contact there was

between them in Rome. Peter may well have already died when Paul was brought to Rome in chains; what we do know, however, is that both lived and died with a passion for Christ, and that Christ used the talents and gifts of both to forward the work of the Kingdom.

Peter and Paul teach us that faith, true faith in Jesus Christ is not simply something that is “second hand”, merely handed on to us by our parents. True faith involves a personal and unique encounter with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Christ promised that He would be with us always; with us as the Church, and with us as individual believers. We experience Him in the every day joys and sorrows of our sometimes boring lives. We experience Him in the beauty of nature which we often ignore. We experience Him in the love of our family and friends whom we so often take for granted. Sometimes like Peter we experience Him in our shame as Christ’s eyes met Peter’s after he said a third time, “I do not even know the man,” or like Paul when fallen to the ground he heard Christ’s words, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Every moment of our lives provides an opening for us to experience His personal love and compassion for us as He constantly tries to break into our lives.

As we celebrate this Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, we remember the way in which God actively created and sustained the early church through the works and courage of these two dedicated believers. But, to remember them is not to live in the past, it is to learn from and be inspired by those who have come before us in faith, so that we can better live that faith in the present and move toward the future. Take the time this week to remember. Remember where God has been in your life, how He has been with you, how He has supported you, how He has blessed you with certain talents and gifts, how He has called you even though you may not be Peter or Paul. That kind of prayer of remembrance can be a moving and valuable experience that can lead to a deeper awareness of the here and now, of how God frees you and protects you, and sends you just as He did Peter and Paul.