

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles

(Acts 12:1-11; 2Timothy 4:6-8; Mathew 16:13-19)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

Today, is the day consecrated by the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul! We consider, these saints, after Jesus Christ, to be the very cornerstones of the Church. Peter, the "Prince of the Apostles;" represents the faith of the Church is the touchstone of unity in the Church to this very day and St.Paul, the "Apostle to the Gentiles" represents the mission of the Church is the first and the greatest Christian Missionary. These two dynamic saints of the early Church are great heroes for all Christians. Even though they are great saints and yet they were two very fallible human beings. Paul was the persecutor of Christians and Peter denied Christ three times. And yet it is entirely typical of the way God deals with his people that these two unlikely characters should become such important figures in the establishment of the Church. The Lord stood by them and gave them power, so that through them the message might be proclaimed to all the people by their faith and their martyrdom.

The stories of Peter and Paul each starts with a name change. A curious thing in the Bible, whenever God wanted a person to do something really marvellous, God changed their name. For example, we call Abraham our "father of faith." Abraham started life as Abram. Then, when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him, and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me. . . . I will make a covenant between me and you. . . . No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham". Abraham became the father of faith to the Hebrew people, to us Christians, and to the Muslims. So too a name change for Peter and Paul. Peter began life as Simon, s/o John; Paul grew up named Saul, Saul of Tarsus.

We know these stories. Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee "when he saw two brothers, Simon . . . and Andrew his brother casting nets into the sea. . . . And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men'". From then on, Simon, s/o John, was Simon Peter, and finally, just Peter.

Saul of Tarsus was travelling to Damascus when "suddenly a light from heaven flashed. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" . Saul of Tarsus became Paul the great evangelist to the Gentiles.

In today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about a miraculous experience of Peter. He was scheduled to die at the hands of King Herod, but an angel freed him from his chains. He was told by the angel to get up, get dressed and get out. Peter thought he was dreaming, but once out on the street the angel left him to go and show himself to all those who had been praying for him.

In the Second Reading we hear Paul's writing a summary of his faith-life. He is looking back on his days as some kind of race in which he has finished well by keeping faith in the midst of troubles. He boasts that the Lord has stood by him and kept him safe for his part in continuing the spread of the Good News that all are saved by the goodness and mercy of God.

The Gospel takes us back to Peter. The Pharisees, at the beginning of the chapter from which our section is taken, demand signs for proof that Jesus is sent from God as Messiah. He warns His disciples about that kind of relating with God, that is, there has to be evidence or signs which validate Him.

It is within this context that Jesus asks His followers about whom they think or believe Him to be. Peter professes that he, and they, see Jesus as more than a prophet, but the real presence and the Person of God made human. He is the Son of the living God.

Not as a prize for saying the correct answer, but as an affirmation and ordination, Peter is called to be the "*Foundation*" person among the "called". The word we use for "church" is *kuriakon* which is taken from the Greek, means "*the community or assembly called together by and belonging to the Lord*". Peter is named to be the *Chief Caller*. In a sense he is called to be a caller. He became the first person of the Church and so defines what the Church is.

In a sense this feast celebration is ours as well. Peter and Paul and you and I are called from, so we can be for the moments of preaching and revealing what Church is. I am Paul ie. *Church* when I encourage, instruct, reconcile, bless, correct, serve and ultimately lay down my life for believing. I am Peter ie. *Church* when I confront, challenge, form community, sacramentalize important moments within community, preach a faith-doing-justice, and be willing to lay my life down for my believing.

Dear brothers and sisters, Ss. Peter and Paul is a symbol of Determination & Dynamism. You may think why their feast is celebrated together, because both Peter and Paul travelled to spread Christianity to Rome where they were both martyred. Humanly speaking both of them were different in their education, religiosity and character. Peter was a common fisherman, with no formal education as best as we can tell. He responded to Jesus' call to follow and then stumbled his way through the Lord's public life, and beyond. Peter recognized that Jesus was the Messiah and professed his faith to the Lord in Capernaum. **“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”**

Peter had faith enough to walk on water himself to meet Jesus on the Sea of Galilee, but then he thought about what he was doing, focused on himself instead of on Jesus and began to drown. That's why Jesus scolded him as one of little faith.

Two very different saints, one a large and ignorant fisherman, the other a small and educated scholar, yet two very similar saints in this: *they shared the determination to live and die for the Kingdom of God* even if this meant that they needed to make radical changes in their lives. Even if this meant that they had to sacrifice their lives. And sacrifice their lives they did.

Dear friends, here is some Peter and some Paul in each of us. Each of us has some of their inadequacies. Each of us also enjoys some of their strength. On the negative side, all of us tend to bungle through life like Peter, making great promises, taking great oaths, and then backing down when the situation becomes too tough, too demanding. How many times have we all, including myself, compromised standing for the Lord in order to prevent being mocked by the crowd. Sometimes we go through life like the firestorm that was Saul of Tarsus, convinced that our view of the world is correct and willing to destroy anyone who disagrees with us.

There are also a lot of the good qualities of Peter and Paul in each of us. Serious about our Christianity, we all have a tremendous desire to serve the Lord in whatever way he calls us. We all have summoned from within ourselves the muscle of Peter and intellect of Paul to serve Jesus.

There is something else that Peter and Paul and we have in common. It is the dynamism. The dynamic founders of Rome received their strength from the Holy Spirit of the Father and Son. We have also received this strength, this dynamism, to some degree or other.

The dynamism, the strength to lead others to God was given to us at our Pentecost, our confirmation. It is the Holy Spirit, the dynamic presence of God, within you and me that has makes the Church a living reality in the world.

One last thought about unity: All of us know that unity is strength. In their lifetime, Peter and Paul did not work so closely together. Peter was called directly by Jesus and given “the keys of the kingdom”. He is portrayed in icons carrying the keys. Paul, on the other hand, probably never met Jesus face to face. Once a persecutor of the church, his conversion came about through a vision on the road to Damascus. His inspiration and his style of presenting the gospel came from visions and charismatic experiences. He is portrayed in icons carrying either a sword or a book. Peter and Paul were so different that Peter was surnamed the *Apostle of the Jews* and Paul *the Apostle of the Gentiles*. Paul once had a public disagreement with Peter on whether *Jewish Christians* could eat together with *Gentile Christians*. Paul publically rebuked and humiliated Peter in Antioch. (Galatians 2:11-14).

If Peter and Paul did not agree in life, at least they did agree in death. Both suffered the same kind of death, martyrdom, in the same city, Rome, at about the same time, between 64-67 CE. The early church recognized Peter and Paul as the two main pillars of the church of Christ.

This is portrayed in an ancient icon with Peter on the right and Paul on the left, each extending a hand with which they bear up the church. By placing two of them together in one icon, united in lifting up the church, the church is sending a message to all her children that they all likewise should be united, in spite of individual and local differences, in building up the one church of God.

In the early church there was a tendency to splinter into various factions, each faction claiming to follow the leadership of one of the chief apostles or missionaries. This was one of the reasons why Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were breaking up into followers of Paul, followers of Peter, and followers of Apollos. Paul reminds them strongly that these fallible human leaders are all equally servants of the one Christ. **Christ, therefore, should be their focus and not the human leaders.**

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. (1 Corinthians 3:21-23)

If division among believers was a problem in the days of Paul, it is even more so today. Disunity of Christians is a scandal that weakens the Christian witness to the world. How can Christian churches preach love and unity, forgiveness and reconciliation to the world when they themselves are living in disunity, unable to forgive and reconcile themselves? Even within the walls of the same church, there are visible cracks of disunity. Today, the faithful are quick to label themselves either as *Conservatives or Liberals, Eastern or Western, or Orientals or Occidental, Clergy or Laity etc.* For example, Conservatives, who often identify with the institutional authority of Peter, wage war against liberals; and liberals, who identify with the charismatic vision of Paul, wage war against conservatives. By combining the feasts of the apostles Peter and Paul, the church is inviting all her children to look beyond the conservative-liberal divide, or Oriental-Occidental divide, or Eastern-Western, or clergy-laity divide and discover a deeper level of unity in Christ. The church of Christ needs the rock of Peter's institutional leadership as well as the vitality of Paul's charismatic vision. Christian unity, like the unity of Peter and Paul, is not a unity in uniformity but a unity in diversity. Today the church reminds us that, even though as individuals and local communities some will prefer the style of Peter and others that of Paul, we should not let that divide us since we are all, first and foremost, followers of the one Lord Jesus Christ and children of one God the Father.

May the determination and dynamism, and the unity in diversity of these great apostles mark our lives, as we strive to continue the apostolic mission of the Church.

Saint Peter and Saint Paul, pray for us!

(This homily was given by Fr.Tharian Njaliath on the occasion of the Solemnity of Ss.Peter and Paul at the Eucharistic Celebration on 29th June 2010 in the Papal Seminary Chapel.)