

**Sunday 28 June 2020 (Wk 13 OT Yr A) SS Peter & Paul Solemnity**  
**Acts 12:1-11. Ps 33 (34):2-9. 2 Tim 4:6-8,17-18. Matt 16:13-19**

Someone once said to me about the Communion of Saints, "I don't worship dead people." Well, the church doesn't worship them either. We celebrate and commemorate them. And they are not dead people – they are just as alive as we are, but in a different dimension which we call heaven!

We ask our earthly friends to pray for us, and so we ask our heavenly friends pray for us as well! This like all doctrine is rooted in Scripture - in the Bible, is evidenced by the prayers inscribed in the catacombs, and taught by the early Church Fathers, successors, and some, disciples to the Apostles.

So what of our heavenly friends, St Peter and St Paul?

In AD 43 four legions of the Roman imperial army landed on the coast of Kent to begin their task of turning Britain into a Roman province.

After they had advanced on London, and before they had crossed the river Thames, the legions received an important visitor in the shape of Claudius, their new emperor.

Claudius was no soldier, but he had been raised to the throne by the imperial bodyguard and he was anxious to show his support for the army.

But even above the army, there was one man who had helped Claudius to the throne – his Jewish friend, Herod Agrippa. Claudius had just rewarded Agrippa by granting him the territory of his grandfather, Herod the Great.

And while the new emperor of Rome was overseeing his soldiers in the capture of London, the new king in Palestine, Herod Agrippa, was overseeing his soldiers in the persecution of certain leading Christians in Jerusalem.

As we hear from today's first reading, King Herod beheaded the apostle James. Remember how it was that James together with his brother John and Simon Peter made up the group of three that was closest to Jesus during his lifetime.

When Herod saw that the execution pleased most of his subjects, his next target became Peter, who was thrown into prison to await trial and execution.

The Jerusalem church must have been very discouraged: with James executed and Peter imprisoned, the prospects for the future hardly looked promising. So they all gathered to pray for Peter and, no doubt, for the future of the Church.

Luke tells us that their prayers were answered in a very dramatic way. The night before Peter's condemnation he received a visitor in the shape of an angel.

Peter, who seems to have made a habit of sleeping through crises, was awakened and led through the prison gates to freedom. He thought he was still dreaming, so the angel had to stay

with him for the length of the street until he woke up! When he did, Peter came to see that the power of God was stronger than the power of King Herod.

### **Persecution and Paul**

About two years before Peter's imprisonment, the church in Jerusalem was visited by a new convert, Paul of Tarsus. Paul had been an accomplished persecutor of the followers of Jesus and was feared for his fanatical commitment to his cause.

But he had experienced a conversion in which Christ had spoken to him in a vision appointing him as his chosen instrument to the Gentiles. Paul went to Jerusalem to tell his experience to the apostles, but he stayed in the city for only fifteen days.

Luke tells us why: when Paul arrived "he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him; they could not believe he was really a disciple" (Acts 9:26).

Nonetheless Paul started to preach in the city, but he so angered the Greek-speaking Jews that they sought to kill him. It is worth noting that this was the same group that had stoned Stephen to death, the same group that had placed Stephen's clothes at the feet of Saul the persecutor. Now the persecutor had become the persecuted.

To save his life, members of the Jerusalem church took him to the port of Caesarea and shipped him back to Tarsus where he came from. And as Luke tells us: "The churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace."

Throughout his ministry Paul always claimed that he was in truth an apostle of Jesus, on an equal footing with the Twelve. Most of his letters open with his defensive claim: "From Paul... an apostle who does not owe his authority to men or his appointment to any human being but who has been appointed by Jesus Christ..." (Galatians 1:1-2).

Perhaps more than any imprisonment or lashing, Paul's real pain arose from his awareness that he would never be accepted without reservation in his lifetime. He always had to struggle to prove himself an authentic apostle, not a spy planted by his former employers. Perhaps that agony was his cross.

### **Love without reserve**

Peter had denied Jesus three times, but he had returned as a rock to strengthen and lead the Christian community. Paul had persecuted Christ, but he had changed his ways to become the energetic apostle who pushed the reaches of the Gospel far beyond the confines of Judaea and Samaria.

Both men had fallen; both men had risen again to new heights. Peter was Jesus' choice to head the Christian community and be its source of unity; Paul was Jesus' choice to take his message to the Gentiles.

Both apostles were martyred in Rome under the persecution of the emperor Nero. In their final witness there is nothing doubtful about their love; in the end they are equal in love. Both of them had a love without reserve.

That is why we honour both of them without reserve. In honouring Peter and Paul we also celebrate the ancient foundation of the Church in Rome, which in the early centuries was acknowledged by all Christians as the mother of all the Christian churches.

The Church in Rome had these two great apostles and martyrs at its beginning, a fact the community regarded as a unique privilege. In their foundation they had a double dimension: apostolic leadership and evangelical energy, both marks of the Church today.

That is why in the one of the early canons of the Eucharist, the first two apostles who are mentioned are not Peter and Andrew, but Peter and Paul. Paul does get his unreserved recognition. And today we celebrate them. Together. In one breath.

We are called to live just as these two great men of God lived. We can receive the same kind of interior revelation about Jesus' Lordship, divinity and glory.

Resist the tendency to think that interior revelation is only for the very holy, the mystic or the saint. It is a gift we can all receive by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We can receive this grace of revelation so that we too can penetrate ever more deeply the mystery which is Christ. How do we receive this revelation? We pray, reflect and ponder on the Word of God and ask the Holy Spirit for light and wisdom.

Peter and Paul, our heavenly friends, pray for us and Bognor, for St Wilfrid's, that we may be truly sent to bring the Gospel to everyone.

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