

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the festival of Peter and Paul, both giant figures of the bible, who were apostles, martyred for the cause of Christ. From the gospel accounts of Mark and Matthew we learn that Peter was called first by Jesus from the life of a fisherman by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus gave the invitation, 'Follow me,' and his world changed and would never be the same again. The same invitation, now issued as a command, 'Follow me,' from today's passage from the closing verses of the gospel of John completes a relationship that begins and ends by the sea. From the calling of the simple fisherman to the commissioning of a great leader, Peter's journey with Jesus is deep and powerfully portrayed.

Peter is a real human being. His character is as flawed as the next person. Remember how he was elevated by Jesus for naming him as Messiah and given the keys of authority, the rock upon which the church would grow – only moments later to rebuke Jesus for his statement of his impending destiny, then to receive the immediate and harsh condemnation of Jesus, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' (Matt 16.23) The very human Peter again claims he will never leave Jesus, yet as Jesus rightly predicted, before the cock crew on the morning of Good Friday Peter denied him three times. Three times.

Therefore, three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter is tested here. Can he set his mind on divine things? Can he follow truly in the footsteps of the Lord? The memory of the three denials would always be with him. Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Jesus pressured him more. Simon, son of John, do you love me? And again, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Clearly Jesus wanted an answer deeper than the superficial, 'Yes, Lord.' Too much was at stake for a superficial answer. These were the precious ones Jesus would leave in his care, the lambs and sheep in need of nurture. These were the ones for whom

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Jesus had poured out his heart to God in the great prayer of chapter 17 of John's gospel, the prayer he made before he went up to the cross.

The full responsibility of the leadership to which Jesus commissioned Peter would not be realised until after Pentecost, when inspired by the Holy Spirit he spoke powerfully about the Lord and his place in salvation history to the people gathered. And then when the church began to be established in the turbulent years following Jesus' death and resurrection the reality of the belt fastening around him and hands taking hold on him and leading him away would happen. From the Acts of the Apostles Peter witnesses the death of James the brother of John as he awaited his own destiny in prison. Freed from chains by the miracle of the angel in prison, Peter became the great leader. He fulfilled his destiny as the rock of the church. He overcame his failures and rose to the greatest heights. He learned what Jesus really meant when he asked his love and when he commanded him to follow. Martyrdom would come, not at the hands of Herod, as was James' destiny as we learn from the Acts reading today, but after his work was done and his own destiny fulfilled. He would indeed be led where he did not want to go, as Jesus predicted in the gospel.

Peter is paired with Paul in the grouping of saints honoured in the Anglican Church. The two were different yet similar. Both were strong and capable leaders. Both had their world turned upside down by Jesus and were called from their former ways of life to follow him. While Peter knew Jesus personally, was the first disciple called to follow and was his closest friend through the years of his ministry, Paul never knew Jesus in person. Instead he was a persecutor of Christians, a fervent and zealous Jew determined to maintain the old ways. For many people, Paul is less easy to relate to than Peter. Peter's fallibilities align with our own experiences in life. Paul is almost otherworldly in his drive and determination, his almost fanatical approach to the ministry that created the church.

I think Paul would have been a daunting figure to meet in person. He seems like one of these hyper ambitious people who achieve success in their field no matter the odds. They are driven like most of us are unable to be driven – the perfect constitution to build the church. Jesus laid the foundation upon the rock that Peter would sit after he had ascended to be with God the Father. Paul worked to enable that church to grow and take root in every area where he could physically go. His four journeys are testimonies of amazing endurance and competence in building, in encouraging and in leadership. The Acts of the Apostles records his journeying, and the letters of Paul, and subsequently the letters of his own students and followers, such as the section of the letter to Timothy we have just heard, lay out for us the establishment of the church which is the body of Christ to this day.

Paul was turned in his very footsteps to encounter the Lord while on the road to Damascus. His heart and mind were set against the growing Christian movement, yet Jesus struck him literally blind in the most powerful conversion event recorded. All those skills he had used to persecute the new Christians, the followers of the Way as they were called, he turned toward Christ. No wonder some of the earlier followers were cautious when he appeared in the synagogues and gatherings wanting to become one of them. How do we feel when someone comes to us wanting to know more, wanting to offer themselves for the service of Christ? Do we know how to respond? Are we cautious in case they are not like us?

Paul was not like one of them. He was utterly different, from a different world, and yet Christ called him to follow as he had called the first disciple Peter a lifetime ago.

How does the witness of Peter and Paul influence us today, two millennia later, still the church, still built upon the rock, buffeted about and undermined, yet still the church unfailing in its mission and purpose as the body of Christ. The recent months have challenged churches everywhere around the world to look for new

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initiatives to keep going in the absence of face to face contact. We can draw much hope and inspiration from the witness of these two saints who themselves forged a way through the unknown and sometimes hostile environment, through change and uncertainty into something new and breathtaking. We are the church today because of the unfailing faith of Peter and Paul and their commitment to follow him to the absolute end. Their witness reminds us to hear Jesus' call to follow him and to love him beyond all else.

As much as he asked Peter Jesus asks us, 'Do you love me more than these?' Do you love me more than any other person – even your beloved family? Do you love me more than any other thing – your worldly goods – even your home, your place of comfort and security? Do you love me enough that you would leave everything behind and follow me?

The current time in which we are living, in this year 2020 many things challenge us and shake us to our very core. Can we, like Peter and Paul, trust Jesus and put our absolute faith in him, knowing with certainty that human beings do not have the answers to everything, that indeed we are mortal and expendable in the cycle of creation's deep groaning? Only in God are we so precious, so absolutely priceless that we are named his lambs and sheep and for our sake he laid down his very life. May you draw such strength from the witness of Peter and Paul that you will say unconditionally, "Yes Lord, I love you, and I will follow you always."