

The festival of Peter and Paul is now the most usual time for ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood. I was ordained a priest on this Sunday exactly 40 years ago. But as so many of our regular congregations are away for the summer, we are going to delay the party until the autumn. However, today is a time for me to be thankful for and to reflect on the varied and valuable experiences over these years that have helped me forward to an ever-deeper vision and conviction of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Today we think particularly of the vision of our first predecessors in the apostolic career: Peter, the Galilean fisherman who became chief among the 'fishers of men' or 'catchers for Christ.' And Paul, the erudite and fluent Greek-speaking Pharisee, who through his teaching and letters to the churches first started to make theological sense of the impact of Jesus Christ, following his dramatic conversion whilst he was working to destroy the new Jesus movement.

You will hopefully have noticed that the liturgical colour for today is red. We last used red at Pentecost where it symbolised the coming of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire. That symbol is also appropriate for our two Spirit-filled, Spirit-driven pillars of the Church, but today it speaks more especially of sacrifice; it is the colour of blood, reflecting the complete self-offering of the two men in following Christ to the end. Both achieved martyrdom in Rome during the great

persecution ordered by the unhinged emperor Nero in the year 64 or 65.

Both men were seized by the person and message of Jesus, and they dedicated and finally gave up their lives in following the Jesus Way. It is the people of the Way (capital W) that the first Christians were known. The Way meant a new exodus, liberation from bondage or slavery to sin and the worst ways of the world. Its Jewish followers understood the sacrifice and victory of Christ to be a new Passover, expressed most of all in their gatherings for the breaking of bread, the Eucharist, the thanksgiving for all that God had done for them in Christ. The Way was a Spirit-led community whose members sought to grow more and more to reveal in their own lives the likeness of God in Christ, God's character and passion, God's agenda of love, peace and justice for the world.

Probably the biggest challenge for those of us called to the apostolate of ordained ministry is how to call our people and the Church at large back to the excitement, the vision and the radical message of the apostolic Church. Radical (from the Latin 'radix') simply means 'root,' and the root message of the Church is the gospel. It involves teaching and demonstrating that being Christian makes a significant difference, for many an upheaval, to your life and lifestyle, your world view, and the way you regard and treat other people. Being a follower of Christ is about embracing a way

of life that is frequently bound to be at odds with the status quos, the conventions, and the cultural norms of the secular world around us. It is a life that seeks to bring people together, to welcome people in from across the humanly created distinctions and divisions of the world, which are states of corporate and personal sin that separate us not only from one another but also from God.

The two chief apostles had the enormous task of enabling and guiding the Jewish Jesus movement to evolve into an open and inclusive community that embraced both Jew and Gentile. Although it was a huge challenge, sadly, it has not proved to be unique to those times and circumstances. Christians as individuals and groups, or the Church as a whole or its denominations or traditions have struggled ever since with issues about who can be in or out of the Church including its organised ministries. Just as strict Jews regarded Gentiles as unclean sinners, so Christians have often applied the same label to people they consider different or less than themselves.

We, the Church, or certain parts of it, have not always lived up to Paul's declaration in his letters to the Galatians and Romans, that in Christ we are all children of God and are all equal, an equality signified by our common faith and baptism. Paul stressed that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female; no longer, that is, any distinction which creates superiority or

inferiority, inclusion or exclusion within the Church, the people of God. And we should not for one minute be tempted to think that Paul's three examples from his own time are an exhaustive list of distinctions that are to be disregarded by Christians. For like Peter and Paul, once we recognise and confess that Jesus is Lord, the Christ, then whatever our human distinctions and identities, we are all one people, with complete equality and called to be united in body, heart and life.

If life in Christ means anything at all, it means freedom. To draw on Paul again, it first freed Christians from the yoke of the old Jewish Law; such things as circumcision, food laws, and many petty rules and rigidities no longer counted for anything; it frees us now from self-centredness and impels us to be outward looking, committed to sharing God's love and passion for the world in all its diversity and all its fragility, and to work to create a world in which all are free, all are fed, all are treated with dignity and respect, and all can live together without fear.

We need to pray and work earnestly, even in small ways and in our limited circles of influence, for the values and growth of that Way for which Jesus lived and gave up his life, and for which Peter and Paul sought to make reality in the Christ communities they founded. They too paid the ultimate price as they promoted the values and vision of God and the Lordship of Christ in the face of the idolatry, corruption and

violence of the Roman Empire, the power that ruled their world. Strengthened by their prayers and fellowship with us today within the body of Christ, may we be inspired to share their cause and commitment as we face the challenges of the world and our own small parts of it today.

*SS Peter and Paul are regarded as the twin pillars of the Church. They have been celebrated together on this day, or rather 29<sup>th</sup> June to be precise, from at least the fourth century. That date, the traditional date of the foundation of Rome, may have been chosen deliberately by the Church to demonstrate that the city was given a new foundation in Christ by the two great apostles who both gave up their lives in Rome in the cause of the gospel. We can learn from Peter and Paul how to let Christ possess us so much that we live completely for him.*

*Penitence*

First let us call to mind all those things that prevent us from truly living a Christ-life and ask God to help us grow more deeply into his life and vision.

Jesus said to his apostles, 'You are my friends if you obey my commands.' Let us now repent of the times and the ways we have been disobedient to him.

Lord Jesus, in your love you invite us to be your friends:  
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, in your joy you choose us to go out and bear fruit.  
Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, in your power you send us to be your faithful witnesses: Lord, have mercy.

Have mercy on us, Lord, forgive us failing to hear your voice and following your commands and guidance. Make us, your Church, a true community of faith and love, and lead us on your way to everlasting life. Amen.

*Collect*

Almighty God, whose blessed apostles Peter and Paul glorified you in their death as in their life: grant that your Church, inspired by their teaching and example, and made one by your Spirit, may ever stand firm upon the one foundation, Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive.....

*Peace*

We are fellow citizens with the saints in the household of God, through Christ our Lord, who came and preached peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near.

*Gifts*

Father, accept all we bring before you this day. Guide us with your love and feed us at your table as you nourish the faith of the Church by the preaching of your apostles Peter and Paul. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Preface*

It is indeed right and good that we should give you thanks, praise and glory, almighty and everlasting God, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

For after his resurrection he sent out his apostles and evangelists to preach the gospel to all nations and lead us in the way of truth.

Himself the chief cornerstone, he founded his Church upon the apostles firmly to stand for ever as a sign of your holiness

upon earth and a living witness to all of the way that leads to heaven.

And so with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we lift our voices to join in their unending hymn of praise.....

*Lord's Prayer intro*

Concerned with Peter and Paul, to make God's kingdom come to all the world, we now pray Jesus' prayer to the Father:

*Post Communion*

Lord God, the source of truth and love, keep us faithful to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, united in prayer and the breaking of bread, and one in joy and simplicity of heart, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Blessing*

God, who has prepared for you a city with eternal foundations, bring you, with Peter and Paul and all the saints, to the eternal and triumphant joy of that city; and the blessing.....