

SS Peter & Paul

28th June 2015

'Peter & Paul: Men, Missionaries, Martyrs'

Acts 12: Peter saved from prison by the Lord

2Tim 4: *the crown of righteousness ... to all those who have longed for me*

Mt 16: 13–19: *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*

I want to think about this feast of Saints Peter & Paul under 3 titles: (i) Men; (ii) Missionaries; and (iii) Martyrs.

(i) **Men.** To start with, St Peter and St Paul were men, men of their age, with their faults and failings, their mistakes and misunderstandings. The Gospels, and the *Acts of the Apostles*, don't try to hide from those who read them the human limitations of these two men. Each of them, in their own way, early on, deny Jesus. Peter, scared at the time of Jesus's trial, denies three times that he even knows Jesus; Paul, in his misguided persecution of the early Church did his best to eradicate the followers of Jesus, until the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me." Yet both of them were forgiven; their failings were not the last word. Peter undid his denials of Jesus by his repeated words of love for Jesus after the resurrection: "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Paul had his sight restored in Damascus after the blinding apparition, and immediately

sought Baptism and began preaching the Gospel. They were not condemned in their errors, but led to see that the forgiveness of the Lord would give them a new lease of life, a very different sort of life, productive in the Lord's name. As men, then, they acknowledged their faults, accepted the Lord's gracious forgiveness, and opened their hearts to what He would have them do, not what they could ever achieve — and fail at — on their own.

(ii) **Missionaries.** And so, each of them became missionaries, apostles charged with being "sent" (ἀποστέλλειν — "to send") out into the world. St Paul's missionary work we know more about, since pretty much the last two-thirds of the *Acts of the Apostles* is dedicated to a history of his three great missionary travels. Both Peter and Paul had strong links with the Christian community in Antioch, which seems to have been a powerhouse of the faith. It was from here that St Paul set out on his journeys, and the community to which he returned each time. Both Peter and Paul were each given a good 30+ yrs in which to preach the Gospel, and they did

so with enormous zeal. They established the Church right across the Mediterranean from Jerusalem to Rome, founding countless new Christian communities including in what today we call Syria, Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece. The rate of expansion of the Church, the evangelization carried out by the apostles themselves, meant that even within that first generation of the Church the Good News of Jesus Christ had spread far and wide. In each new church, they left a structure of bishop, priests and deacons to so that the faith could be taught and the sacraments celebrated. The conditions for this evangelizing were not easy; they had to travel mostly by foot, and scrape a living as best they could, and rely often on the goodness of those they met to be housed and fed. But driving them onwards, always, was the Truth of what they knew: that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had known, was risen from the dead, the living Son of God, offering redemption to humanity.

(iii) **Martyrs.** The ultimate to which both St Peter and St Paul were called, was to give their lives for the Lord, in the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom. So, in Rome, three years

apart, they shed their blood that became the “seed of the Church.” Many other martyrs of Rome followed in their wake (feast: 30th June), witnessing repeatedly to the fruitfulness of these martyrdoms, and to the truth of what they would not deny, that “Jesus is Lord.” Still, today, you can visit the sites of Peter’s and Paul’s burials — these sites are crowned with the great basilicas, St Peter’s at the Vatican, and St Paul’s on the Via Ostiense. Going on pilgrimage to their tombs — as the bishops of each country do, once every five years ‘*ad limina apostolorum*’ — takes us very close to these apostles, despite the 2000yrs interval since their day and ours. What joins us to them without any difficulty is the Church herself: we are the very same Church that Jesus Christ founded with the co-operation of Peter and Paul as men, missionaries, and martyrs. St Peter and St Paul live on in our estimation, — heroes of the faith, giants of the Church, saints of Jesus Christ — for they triumphed by giving their lives to the Lord. *SS Peter & Paul, pray for us who are men and women of weak faith, that we may be the Lord’s missionaries and martyrs today!*