

Homily for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul 28th June 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

A favourite place of mine when visiting the Holy Land is a beach by the sea of Galilee, said to be the place where the risen Lord had breakfast with his apostles after the miraculous catch of fish. You can have a good paddle in the warm water (swimming is not encouraged!) near the large stone on which the food was laid out, now enclosed within the small church of St. Peter. After the meal Jesus questioned Peter, three times asking if Peter loved him. Three times, with increasing exasperation it seems, Peter said he did. 'How many times do I have to say it?' you can imagine him thinking, but of course the threefold affirmation redresses his threefold denial of Jesus at the Passion. Three times again Jesus gives him the commission to "feed my sheep." The site is known as the Primacy of Peter from our understanding that Peter is the head, the chief of the apostles.

This episode is the Gospel reading for the Vigil Mass of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, which we keep on this Sunday, for the work of Peter and his companions in establishing the infant Church is matched by the missionary work of Paul and his companions in spreading the new faith beyond its heartland in Palestine, eventually to the whole Middle Eastern world and beyond. Peter and Paul are representative of these two strands in our history, the two great pillars on which the edifice of our religion is built, and people sometimes make a distinction between their different types: Peter as the institution man holding the structures together, Paul as the adventurous outgoing type who cannot be contained within the bounds of the institution.

Whether they really do conform wholly to these stereotypes I am not sure, but it probably is true that our religion needs both types – and I think we have to acknowledge that there can be tension between the two. People who naturally like things to be clear, safe and held within exact boundaries are not always happy with those who naturally want to go beyond the boundaries into uncharted territory and do not mind things being unclear and fuzzy at the edges. They may see the need to do so, otherwise the institution can become fossilised and lifeless, but it makes them feel uncomfortable. The adventurous ones, conversely, can be frustrated by the need to hold things together, even if they recognise that this too is needed.

Throughout the history of our religion there have always been reformers, people who see that the structures have become rigid and may no longer be serving the purpose of making God known – the Church, like every other institution, can become an end in itself and its maintenance such a major preoccupation that we lose sight of what the Church is for: then people come along who say, 'This is not how it should be. We need to reconnect with what we are really about' - not to create something new, but to ensure that the Church is fulfilling its true

purpose. We see this pattern over and over again. In the Benedictine order, for instance, after about 500 years there were monks who thought that monastic life had become too comfortable and had drifted away from Benedict's original vision. So the Cistercian order was born, and that too in its turn needed its reformers. There is an old Latin proverb, *ecclesia semper reformanda*: the Church is always in need of being reformed - not just now and then, but *semper*— always, at every moment. We can never rest content with what we are and what we have, because God is always inviting us to move on, to discover more of his love and goodness.



In recent times people working in the field of spiritual development have become interested in the various ways of understanding human personality – what makes us tick. There is, for instance – this is quite a mouthful – the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which categorises personality types according to how we deal with the world around us, what our typical reactions are, what our motivations are and where we draw energy from. Some people, for example, like a lot of human contact and interaction and are energized by that, others find too much of it exhausting: they are more inwardly looking and reliant on their own inner resources. When I first came across the Myers-Briggs system I resisted the idea that you can analyse human beings according to pre-packaged types, but when I found out about it I came to see that there is a lot of truth in this and other models, though we need not take them too far: they do not tell us the whole truth about ourselves. As well as that the different models will usually say that no one type of personality is better than any other: each has its gifts and its drawbacks. The point is to recognise this is who I am and work with that, while at the same time seeking to go beyond the limitations the type imposes.

Who I am is the person God made me to be and the more we can understand of what makes us who we are the more we will be able to let God work in us, the more we can rejoice in the diversity of human personality as the gift of God, a major aspect of the variety and marvel of all creation.

On this feast of Peter and Paul you might like to ask which of these two great saints do you identify with, which one do you think you are more like. But then go one step further and say, whatever I am I accept that and rejoice in it, because it is how God has made me, and I can use that for his service and his greater glory.

As we emerge from lockdown and return to something like normality it will be even more important that each of us plays our part in the life of the Church, the unique role that God has assigned to each one of us. We may feel I would like to be a different person and be envious of others who seem to be better off than we are, but there is no need to be envious, because if I have God in me nobody can have more than I do - and I do have God! I am his unique creation,

made and loved by God. We can say with the psalmist, I thank you, Lord, for the wonder of my being.

With best wishes and prayers, Fr. Robin

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk