

St Peter and St Paul

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Peter and Paul, apostles and martyrs, Sunday 30th June 2013

Acts 12.1-11; John 21.15-22

As I sat down late this week to write this sermon I could not help but be caught up in the political drama of our government. What an astonishing event. John Howard used to say he was Lazarus rising. Kevin Rudd has certainly risen from the political grave. Remember how he was so comprehensively buried last year?! I don't know about you but I don't know what to make of it all except to think that political parties are now so poll driven they no longer govern on principle and do so exclusively on populism. There is so much one could say and rail against in this whole shambles. I am sure we all have our own opinions and feelings. However whether we think it may be a good thing what has happened, whether we prefer Gillard, Rudd, Abbot or Turnbull, whether we think gender and prejudice have anything to do with it, we can probably all agree that the whole spectacle is a sad and worrying trend. We can probably all agree that good governance, sensible policy debate and democracy is weakened.

Reflecting on all this and what it says about leadership in our political climate has been interesting as I have thought about those two great leaders of the early church St Peter and St Paul. How did they manage the politics of the emerging Christian community?—and do not doubt it—politics is part of the church! How did they negotiate the leadership tensions and jealousies?—and that was certainly there! How did they maintain their focus and mission in the midst of personal dramas, persecution, bloodshed and fear?—and they had all that in spades. Both men were martyred and died bloody and painful deaths. There was no coming back from the grave for these two at least this side of the eternal curtain.

Their story is an extraordinary one. Their individual stories intersected in dramatic and world changing ways. They were very different people with, at least at the first, very different standings in the early church.

- Peter was one of the first disciples Jesus called, one of the inner 12. He knew Jesus personally and was with him throughout his ministry. Paul was not one of the original apostles or even one of the 70 Jesus sent to minister.
- Peter began his ministry when older. Paul was a much younger man.
- Peter began his life with Jesus with love, confidence and faith. Paul began his with enmity and as a persecutor of the church.
- Peter was a simple man, a fisherman. He was ignorant of philosophy or ancient science. In Acts 4.13 it was said of him that he was “uneducated and untrained”. Paul was one of the educated men of his age who studied with the scholar and teacher Gamaliel. In Acts 26.24 he was accused of having too much learning which was driving him insane!
- Peter's ministry was focussed almost exclusively amongst the Jews. He was the “apostle of the circumcision”. Paul's ministry was focussed on the gentiles, the non-Jews.
- Peter was simple in his writings—he said about Paul's letters that in them “were some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction”. You'll find that critique of Paul's writing right there in 2 Peter 3.16! Paul

talked about theological questions like justification, priesthood, ecclesiology, law and grace. Subjects that Peter did not approach.

- Peter was impulsive. My goodness that man did not think before he acted. Remember how he headed over the water to go to Jesus and promptly started to drown? How he cut off the ear of the soldier arresting Jesus? How he rashly promised not to deny Jesus? How he threw himself out of the boat when he recognized the risen Christ on the shores of Lake Galilee? Paul was enthusiastic but he was not impulsive. In comparison he thought through things much more carefully.

Given their differences it is not surprising that these two men argued and disagreed. I am not going to quote chapter and verse because it is quite a story and found in more than one part of the Book of Acts or the epistles. Their disagreement centred around the differences between the people to whom they ministered and whom they led and which theological interpretation best represented Jesus message. To put it crudely Peter wanted to reach the Jews and so wanted to incorporate Jewish religious law into his teaching and expectations. Paul wanted to reach the Gentiles and so wanted to do away with Jewish law and focus on grace not works. These two perspectives and this tension have remained with the church since that time.

Amazingly, despite these differences Peter and Paul were able to work together. Jesus through his teachings, his example, his death and resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit planted the seed of faith in his followers. Peter and Paul nurtured that seed of faith and through their ministry helped it grow into the world-wide church. Icons of St Peter and St Paul together often have them holding a model of a church between them. If they had not been able to work together then the early church would have been torn apart and we would not have the rich, layered record of that time we find in the New Testament. If they had not been able to work together then one of them would have been written out of the bible or at the very least ended up with dreadful press and a tarnished reputation.

One thing we are doing this year is looking at the major Christian saints and seeing what they can teach us about nurture, that is what we can do to help our church grow in faith and into the full maturity of Christ. Peter and Paul were certainly able to do this. Given their differences what was it that made it work as well as it did?

Perhaps it was because despite their differences they had much in common. They were both Jews. Both were called by the Lord and received a name change—Peter had been Simon, Paul had been Saul. Both were gifted with the Holy Spirit and had the power to give the Holy Spirit. Both of them performed wonders and miracles. Both of them were bold and courageous. Each of them taught and preached and made efforts in ministry. Each of them suffered many persecutions—they were gaoled, goaded, questioned, tortured and abused. Each of them ended his life as a martyr, possibly in the year 67 AD. St Peter was crucified head down. St Paul was beheaded with a sword.

However, there is one virtue, one quality and one over riding agenda that were common to both and we would do well to copy if we wish to nurture faith in ourselves and others. The virtue they shared was humility. Despite their great gifts, their power and authority they knew themselves and never forgot their humanity and failings. At the beginning of Peter's time with Jesus, after the miracle of the great catch of fish, Peter fell down at Jesus feet and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord". Jesus must have known Peter was only a weak, unreliable, impulsive man but he chose him anyway and continued to choose him. Tradition has it that Peter asked to be crucified up side down as he believed himself not worthy to be crucified as the Lord.

Paul described himself as a “blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent man” (1Tim 1.13) although he knew himself forgiven. He describes himself as the “least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the early church” (1 Cor. 15.8-9)

Humility has been called the queen of virtues. Mother Theresa of Calcutta said this about humility. “Humility is the mother of all virtues; purity, charity and obedience. It is in being humble that our love becomes real, devoted and ardent. If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed you will not be discouraged. If they call you a saint you will not put yourself on a pedestal.”

Humility is a virtue we all need to cultivate if we are going to work together to build our community and faith. For we all need each other. No one of us is the messiah. No one of us is essential for this community. Yet each one of us, together, make up the Body of Christ and as Christ’s body we can live out our mission and purpose.

The quality both men had was perseverance. Perseverance is steady persistence in a course of action, a purpose, especially in spite of difficulties or discouragement. When you think about the life of Peter and Paul I am astonished neither of them packed it in and gave up. The challenges and difficulties they both faced were overwhelming. Their own failures and misunderstandings were monumental. Yet they kept going. Paul wrote that “difficulties produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” and as we persevere we find that our hope is real because the Holy Spirit will make all things work together for goodness and God’s purposes.

I can think of quite a few things we need to persevere about here at St Philip’s. I am sure you can too! We persevere by taking things one step at a time day by day trusting all to God.

Lastly, both Peter and Paul shared an over riding agenda ... they both, unfailingly, passionately, devotedly pointed to Jesus Christ. It was Christ’s message they preached and proclaimed and died for. It was their love of the Lord that drove their ministry and efforts. Peter and Paul are larger than life characters of the New Testament, yet they did not promote themselves. They consistently pointed to Jesus Christ. Christ was their alpha and omega, their beginning and their end. In the end they decreased so that Christ would remain central. We too need to decrease so the Christ will shine in us. We too need to put the gospel and Jesus teachings first here and in our lives. For it is Jesus Christ and his Spirit that nurtures and encourages, sustains and leads. May we find in the lives of St Peter and Paul a fresh example of how to walk the way of Christ. Amen