

**SS Peter and Paul
Patronal Festival
St. Paul's, Milford
Sunday 28 June 2015: 9:30am**

Today we celebrate the patronal festival of this church. An important day in the corporate life of St. Paul's. An opportunity to bring together our two Sunday congregations, to demonstrate the unity we have. However, above all else an opportunity to draw strength from the patron of this church, St. Paul the Apostle and also St. Peter. As we shall see, the two are bracketed together on this day. Now, I think it's helpful to keep in mind the distinction between a patronal festival and a dedication festival. The parish history tells us that this church was dedicated on 8 April 1979 – just over 36 years ago. That suggests that the dedication festival should take place then. 36 years ago isn't such a long period. How many of you were here then?

Our focus then is on the patrons rather the building. St. Peter and St. Paul, the greatest apostles of all and yet the Church makes them share this day. Surely they should each have a day of their own? Well, they do actually, but the major celebration is today. The great St. Augustine notes:

Both apostles share the same feast day, for these two were one. And even though they suffered on different days they were as one. Peter went first and Paul followed. And so we celebrate this day made holy for us by the apostles' blood. Let us embrace what they believed, their life, their labours, their sufferings, their preaching and their confessions of faith.

Who could say enough about these great preachers of our faith? What they did must leave us in awe. Paul especially was quite an intimidating figure. Nevertheless, those who heard him said (and it's Paul who tells us this): "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account."

Both men left us their teaching: Peter – tradition holds that St. Mark's Gospel is based upon Peter's teaching and we have letters from Peter and records of his sermons in Acts. Paul is the writer of most of the letters of the New Testament and we have his sermons recorded also in Acts.

We remember them as the leaders who guided the early church just after the time of Jesus. Both died as martyrs for the faith in Rome, thirty years after Jesus died. Peter was crucified upside down at what is now St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded between Rome and the sea. Tradition has it that Peter was buried in what is now the Vatican City and that the great St. Peter's Basilica was built on top of his tomb. Tradition also holds that Paul was buried in the nearest cemetery and the Basilica of St. Paul's outside the Walls was later built on top of his tomb. So much for how they died and where they died and where they were buried.

More importantly, we need to consider their place in the history of the Church. Each of these two saints is important for different reasons. Peter is important because he was the first Bishop of Rome and thus the pre-eminent leader of the church. He kept the church united in the early years. The church was growing very rapidly at that time. They were having to make important decisions. The most important question they faced was this: Does a follower of Jesus first need to become a Jew? That issue dominated church debates for many years. In the first years after Pentecost it was Jews who first accepted Jesus as the Saviour. So the early church was a very Jewish church.

As time went on Paul began to preach also to non-Jews, the Gentiles as they were called. We are Gentiles. His preaching was very effective and he brought huge numbers of non-Jews into the church, so much so that the number of Jews

in the church was greatly outnumbered by non-Jews. Because of Paul we are now in the Church. Peter and Paul both had very important tasks in the early church. Peter maintained the unity in the church, which during his lifetime had already spread throughout the Middle East and Europe. Paul taught the Jews that Jesus is the fulfillment of their Old Testament hopes and taught the non-Jews that Jesus is the Saviour. Whenever we see pictures or statues of Peter and Paul, Peter is usually holding a key, symbolizing his duty as head of the church. Paul is usually holding the Bible, symbolizing his preaching.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul tells us something of the difficulties in his preaching journeys:

Five times I have been given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked and once I have been in the open sea for a day and a night. I have worked with unsparing energy for many nights without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and often altogether without food or drink. I have been cold and lacked clothing.

Three times Paul set out from Syria where he was based and preached all over what we now call Turkey and in his second and third journeys he preached all over Greece also. He wasn't one of the Twelve Apostles, but we call him an apostle of the nations.

It's interesting to note the personalities of both Peter and Paul. That may stem from their very different backgrounds. Paul had the very best education in the finest Jewish schools, but Peter, on the other hand, had no formal training – he was a fisherman, called from the minding of the nets to become among the greatest fishers of men.

But both were called to be missionaries: Peter – first to be called by Jesus to be an apostle; who began his mission to the Jews. Paul – last to be called by Jesus to be an apostle; who knew his mission was to the Gentiles. Both then were gifted with boldness and zeal to bring the Gospel to the ends of the world.

Peter was impetuous. He told Jesus that he would die with him on that Maundy Thursday night if necessary. Later that same night he denied he even knew him. We also remember Peter's objection to Jesus' prediction that he would suffer and die in Jerusalem and Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan, because the way you think is man's way and not God's way". Yet what made Peter a suitable candidate for Jesus' call was his love, so three times Jesus asked him if he loved him and asked him to look after the flock.

Paul was a controversial character in his own way. He had a fiery personality. In his early life he used that fire for persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem. He even witnessed the death of Stephen, the first martyr for Jesus. After his conversion Paul's preaching was fiery and upset the churches. In Acts we read that Paul then returned to Tarsus and the next sentence says it all. "The churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria were left in peace." Paul spent 10 years back in Tarsus before he began his preaching. It was a time for him to cool down and learn what the death and resurrection of Jesus meant for us all.

Why did God call Paul? Paul was a highly educated Pharisee. Only someone like him would see that faith in Jesus demanded a totally new relationship with God for Jews. He too had a very strong personality. He needed this to help the Jews to accept that Jesus was the Saviour of all peoples. Because of Jesus there is no difference between Jew and non-Jew. Paul had the strong personality

needed for that daring challenge and the insight to see that faith in Jesus, the fulfillment of their Old Testament hopes, was now required for salvation.

As we look at the personalities of Peter and Paul we see that God called them to use their personalities to spread the Gospel. Peter to use his impetuous love to look after the flock and Paul to use his training as a Pharisee and his strength of character to ensure that the non-Jews would be welcomed into the church. It's a reminder to us that our talents and our weaknesses too can become God's means of helping others, if we allow it. We don't have to be perfect for God to work through us. God can work through us, faults and all, as he did with Peter and Paul.