

Good morning everyone,

I think that in every church I have served, we have kept the Sunday on or nearest to 29th June in honour of the two great apostles, Peter and Paul. This is in keeping with what is taking place in cathedrals and churches where ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood are being celebrated on this Sunday. Both of my ordinations took place within the festival of the two apostles, who are held up as inspirations and examples for us to follow in ministry. The date of the festival is based on the traditional date of the foundation of the city of Rome by the legendary Romulus, but its Christian significance is that Rome is the city where both apostles gave up their lives in the service of Jesus Christ.

Acts of the Apostles 12: 1 – 11

It is 42AD and Herod Agrippa (grandson of Herod the Great and nephew? of Herod Antipas) is now the vassal ruler of the Jewish homeland. He unleashes a persecution on the young Church, in part to enhance his public image. He has James the son of Zebedee killed, and later has Peter arrested and imprisoned, no doubt with a view to executing him once the Passover season was over. We have no precise understanding of what exactly happened, but our passage shows how in answer to some fervent prayer, Peter has a miraculous escape from jail. This story may well have been written up by Luke to stress the providential nature of Peter's survival, as his execution would have been a disaster for the Church. It also declares that the gospel and the will of God cannot be 'chained.' After this scene Peter largely disappears from the Acts narrative and Paul becomes the prominent figure.

2 Timothy 4: 6 – 8 & 17 – 18

It is now almost universally accepted that although they are attributed to Paul, the apostle himself did not write the 'pastoral epistles' to Timothy and Titus. There is compelling evidence that they are the work of a much later writer, probably a member of a supposed 'school of Paul,' disciples of his who continued to 'develop' his teaching after his death in around 65AD.

Today's passage, however, sounds more like the real Paul. It could be part of a genuine farewell letter or other message of Paul that the writer had in his possession, or it could be that he knew Paul's thoughts or words at the end of his life so well that he could express them as if Paul himself had written them.

In the reading, Paul clearly expects execution and sees the pouring out of his lifeblood as an offering to God, a fitting completion of the sacrificial service he has already given. He has kept going like a long-distance runner, right to the finishing line. The faith that he has held holds him still. He now looks forward to the final triumph of Jesus Christ with hope, confidence and joy. Whenever death comes, he will not be afraid for God will hold him and bring him through to glory.

Matthew 16: 13 – 19

In Matthew's account, Peter confesses Jesus not only as Messiah or Christ but also as Son of God, whereas in Mark, presumably the original version, the first human being to call Jesus 'Son of God' is the centurion at the cross. Paul begins his letter to the Romans proclaiming Jesus 'Son of God' by his resurrection from the dead. Are we seeing in the Gospel a

post-Easter declaration of faith being 'read back' into a scene in Jesus' lifetime? Possibly, but the matter is academic because the question of Jesus, 'Who do you say that I am?' is for us, and for the whole Church and for Christians in every generation to answer. To be able to affirm Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God is a special gift from God. The disciple Simon is given the name Peter by Jesus to signal that by the quality of his faith, he is the 'rock' that founds the Church. The Church will continue to be built by those who possess such a rock-like faith in Jesus.

This Church will be battered, tossed about like a boat in a storm but it will never be broken or sunk. The powers of evil will not prevail against it. It will open doors of life to many through the good news it carries and will shape the character of God's people.

To confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, as Peter and Paul did, requires not just our lips but our hearts and lives. We are people who *follow* Jesus and who therefore express our faith most of all by the way we live.

The Collect for Saints Peter and Paul:

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 make one by your Spirit, may ever stand firm upon the one foundation, Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

Every blessing for Sunday and the coming week.

Love and prayers,

John