

Sersmon, Feast of St Peter & St Paul
St Bartholomew's Burnley, June 29, 2025

I. The two apostles we're celebrating today both have very dramatic stories in the New Testament. They're stories that include failure and mistaken turnings, but they're stories of the ultimate triumph of God's love and grace.

Tradition tells us that they both ended up in Rome and that they were both martyrs for their faith - sometime in the 60s, some thirty years after Jesus's death and resurrection. They had had successful ministries as apostles.

Both are also writers on New Testament texts: thirteen letters written in Paul's name and two letters in Peter's name, as well as the Gospel of Mark which many believe has Peter's name behind it.

And they're both important figures for us because they are two of the key leaders in the early church who built it and formed our faith in Christ.

II. Peter was one of the first of the disciples to follow Jesus, early in his ministry. We know he had a family: a wife and a mother-in-law who lived with them. He comes across in all the Gospels as a very fiery and spontaneous character, who tends to speak and act before he thinks, who responds immediately and openly to what is going on around him. He's often the spokesperson for the Twelve apostles and he's generally the first to speak and act.

He's also quite a self-confident character. When it comes to Jesus' arrest and passion he's convinced he won't fail Jesus, despite Jesus warnings. And yet he does fail. He does try to stay with Jesus and remain loyal to him, but in the courtyard of the high priest, surrounded by all those frightening authorities, he denies Jesus three times.

In our Gospel reading today in John 21, the risen Christ rehabilitates Peter. Three times he asks Peter whether he loves Jesus, a questioning Peter finds increasingly painful, and on the basis of that love he commissions Peter to be the shepherd of Christ's flock. Jesus also predicts that he will die a martyr's death.

In the Book of Acts, Peter has a powerful ministry of teaching and healing in the early church, and he ends up being persecuted for his witness to Christ. St Paul tells us that Peter was the apostle to the Jewish people, bringing many of them to know Christ.

III. Paul's story is a rather different one. He never knew Jesus in his lifetime and only became a follower of Christ after the resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles tells us about how he had a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus that completely overturned his life.

We see something of Paul's character, not only in the Book of Acts but even more in his own writings, his letters. He was an educated man, taught by the very gentle and moderate Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem who was a Pharisee. Paul also had a trade as a leather worker.

Paul comes across as a passionate man, loyal and fully committed to whatever he believed. Whether as a persecutor of the church before his experience on the Damascus Road or later as a disciple and apostle of Jesus, he gave everything, his whole self, to what he believed with great energy and commitment.

At the same time, Paul tells us that he also had a problem, some sort of physical ailment that he found difficult and embarrassing. He speaks of it as his 'thorn in the flesh'. It seems he was not an impressive public speaker, even though he's so articulate in his letters. People have since speculated as to whether he had a stammer perhaps or some other problem with his speech.

Paul became the great apostle of the Gentiles, as Peter was to the Jews. Though a deeply committed Jew himself, he nevertheless opened the doors of the church to those who were considered outsiders. Sometimes he has a bad reputation — of being a misogynist but there's no evidence of this. On the contrary, Paul speaks of women as apostles and deacons and has the greatest respect for those who women worked alongside him for the spread of the gospel.

IV. When we look at their writings and their experiences, we see that both these leaders had a profound sense of God's mercy and love and grace. Both also had as the centre of their lives and mission a passionate and joyful love of Christ, enveloping and inspiring and strengthening them.

For that reason neither of them was afraid of their failures or their weaknesses. Peter doesn't try to dismiss or even play down his own failure at Jesus' arrest. With his authority in the church he could have easily had that story suppressed. But he doesn't. On the contrary, he uses his own experience to proclaim the forgiving love of Christ.

The same with Paul. He speaks of himself as the least of the apostles, a persecutor of the church. He knows and acknowledges the wrongs he's committed. And when it comes to his own personal weakness, he uses it to proclaim the grace of Christ.

V. So how does this feast connect to us and our lives today? In the first place, we can have a deep sense of thanksgiving for the leaders of the early church, the apostles, those women as well as men who shaped the church in the image of Christ's forgiving and accepting love.

Secondly, Peter and Paul are models for us of how to be church. They were not obsessed by image and reputation, as so many of our institutions are today, but put Christ as front and centre. Their failures were seen as not something to be covered over but rather as an opportunity, in mission and evangelism, to display the kind and merciful nature of God; which reaches out to all people, regardless of race or gender or sexual orientation or any kind of diversity.

Finally and above all, to celebrate Sts Peter and Paul is to celebrate the love Christ — the love he has for each one of us, a love that accepts us, warts and all. It's a love that calls us to our own mission and service, in our own context—both as individuals and as a parish — to show forth that divine, accepting love in our lives, in both word and deed.

Thanks be to God.

Mthr Dorothy Lee