

Peter & Paul Cathedral 28/6/20: Acts 12:1-11; Ps 87; 2 Tim 4:6-18; Jn 21:15-22

Help us Lord to hear you speaking to us today as to how we should live to the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Yes, today we celebrate Peter and Paul; St Peter and St Paul leaders in the early Christian Church. Their example make clear what we should expect from leaders. We give thanks that both Peter and Paul centred their focus on the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ. Especially today we give thanks for these Christian leaders. in recognition of their martyrdom, as we will be reminded as the choir sings: “For all the saints who from their labours rest, who to the world their Lord by faith confessed, your name, O Jesus, be for ever blessed. Hallelujah, hallelujah!

The readings today all confirm different aspects of these Christian leaders: Peter and Paul.

Paul reveals to Timothy his son in the faith three characteristics that can be examples in the church today. “I have fought the good fight” “I have finished the race” “I have kept the faith”

“I have fought the good fight.” The language seems severe. But conveyed in the image here is the battle that every Christian has to contend when we are faced with opposition. As you know our Lord Jesus Christ didn't give us a mandate to use force by subjecting others to the faith. It wasn't a matter of putting a sword to the neck of an Indian, like the conquistadors of South America and saying “You become a Christian or else!” Today we are still dealing with opposition but it is with principalities and powers that are in opposition to the Christian truth.

The word for fight that is used by Paul here is a word for a contest in an arena. When an athlete can really say that he has done his or her best; and comes off the field conscious that every effort has been put into the contest; then whether they have won or lost they really have done their best. That is what is meant here. There is no satisfaction in all the world like knowing that we have done our best.

But of course even with these two great leaders there was much that they would have been ashamed of. Think of Paul, persecutor of the Church in his early life before his conversion on the Road to Damascus. And think of Peter who had to be chastised by our Lord on more than one occasion. When Jesus was foretelling his death and declared “You will all become deserters.” Peter pronounces: “Though all become deserters, I will never desert you.” You know what happened; just as Jesus said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” But as we heard in the Gospel the Lord graciously comes to Peter and grants forgiveness. Both these leaders model that repentance and belief in the Lord Jesus is always possible.

2.

In today's Gospel we heard the Lord questioning Peter three times: "Do you love me" and inviting Peter's response of love. We see here that even a leader can make a mistake. We all do. But we need to know to whom we can return and find grace and forgiveness; that is only possible in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second: We can say: "I have finished the race." That is precisely the difficulty in life. Easy to begin; hard to finish. The one thing necessary for life is staying. There is a deep satisfaction in reaching the goal. Paul had also declared to the elders of the Church at Ephesus similar words: "I do not count my life as of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:24) Do you know this good news for yourself? The gospel indeed is good news. All that Jesus came to do amongst us can be ours through faith in him. People can ask: 'What good news?' Where else is there forgiveness; where else is there peace from God; where else is there the absolute eternal safety for all who have finished the race? Only in Jesus.

Peter also knew this to be true. Yes in the past he had come a croppa; he had got things mixed up. But who could fail to be impressed with his trust in God and guidance by the Holy Spirit in his release from prison, as recorded in today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles. And earlier on do you remember when he spoke to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost with the birth of the Church and 3,000 were converted. This transformation in Peter's life is possible for all who believe.

When I think on this statement by Paul "I have finished the race" I recall a conversation that I had here in Goulburn with the Rev'd Milos Ledl (now gone to his rest). He believed that our ministry must include older people. Milos stated that all people, especially older people must be assured, if they trust in Christ that they are safe with God for ever. I'm very conscious of this truth because my work in Canberra at St John's Reid is in aged care. The years easily slip by but as I would often say to my own children: the most important thing in life, no matter what age you are, is to personally put your trust in the Saviour. I say it to you all today the same words; and to affirm for yourself those words of St Paul "I have finished the race". I have finished the race by trusting in the Saviour.

Finally "I have kept the faith." Yes, both Paul and Peter had kept the faith. They had served Christ in different ministries; through thick and thin; in freedom and in prison; and in all kinds of peril their hope and trust had centred in Christ. As mature men in the faith they could make this claim. But they could remember times past when life had been different. For this reason too they could commend the Saviour who gives to all people a fresh start. There can be a new beginning for all people without having to live with past guilt when you come to the Saviour.

3.

Peter himself would remember the time when Jesus questioned him three times: “Do you love me?” This gave Peter the opportunity to wipe out the threefold denial that had earlier taken place; showing now that Peter indeed affirmed his love and loyalty and was forgiven by the Lord.

Yes as Paul stated which I am sure could well have been attested by Peter: “I have fought the good fight”: “I have finished the race”; “I have kept the faith”.

There is now just one other matter to attend to in speaking to you about leaders. It comes right at the end of today's gospel reading. It's when Peter wonders about another early leader amongst Christ's disciples; the Apostle John. “What about that man?” asks Peter. Jesus responds by answering Peter: “What is that to you?” As for you, “follow me.” The reply that Jesus makes helps us to understand the importance of personally following Jesus, and not encouraging curiosity or even jealousy about God's plans for others. The answer by Jesus is just as apt as ever it was. “What is that to you? As for you, follow me.” And our task today is like those early Christian leaders. It is to follow Christ. He may well call us to be leaders but we each have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel by the words we speak and the life we live. In doing so we too, like Peter and Paul will want to “Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim til all the world adore his sacred name.” **Amen.**

Canon Kevin Stone