

## Homily – St. Peter & St. Paul, Apostles (A) June 29, 2014: St. Monica's

**Acts 12:1-11:** Peter in prison – the church prays for him: “Fasten your belt ... follow me ... The Lord has sent his angel to rescue me.”

**Psalms 34:** God delivers me in my hour of need: “Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.”

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18:** Paul's life poured out: “I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith.” Now that his mission of proclaiming Christ's message to the Gentiles is complete, his life is in God's hands.

**Matthew 16:13-19:** “*Who do you say that I am?*” The Christ, the Son of God! Peter: the Rock, the Shepherd, called to share in Christ's mission of binding and setting free.

***“But YOU ... who do YOU say that I am?”***

Questions, questions. We pray, we go on retreat, we come to Mass – in order to carve out some space in our busy lives for God. For many of us, that means **talking to God**. Sometimes we do so in the formal language of vocal prayers, or through the Scriptures, or some other kind of spiritual reading. Other times, we just talk to God in our own words: kneeling at our bedside, sitting in a comfortable chair, walking in the woods, or stopping in the middle of a busy day: to ask for God's help, or to thank God for a particular blessing.

It IS important to talk to God. But it is also important to take some time to LISTEN to God. If there are all kinds of questions that we want to ask God, there may also be questions that God wants to ask us – questions that can literally change our lives, help us see our lives in a wholly new way.

Certain questions are asked of us from a very young age: “What do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want to study? What talents and skills will you develop? Who will be your friends? What qualities do you seek in a life-partner?” These are the questions of growth, of decision, of change. The answers come in stories, dreams, hopes, goals. They help define who we are, and who we will become.

In the spiritual life, these questions also come up. In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius of Loyola refers to these spiritual conversations as “colloquies.” At the end of a time of focused prayer, we enter into a dialogue with God: *“as one friend speaks to another ... now asking for some grace, now asking forgiveness for some misdeed, now seeking advice in some matter.”*

People sometimes give up prayer because they feel that they are doing all this talking, but nothing is happening: their prayers are not getting answered. Yet when we persevere, every so often, something amazing happens. Jesus takes the lead in the conversation. We let go of our need to control the agenda, and God speaks directly to our heart.

Every so often, God has a really big question to ask us. These questions can leave us feeling uncomfortable, vulnerable, or confused. Yet when we stay with those hard questions, resisting the temptation of avoiding or running away from them, we discover that God graces us with the capacity to say Yes to whatever it is that he is asking of us. We learn that God does not call “perfect people”, but ordinary people, like you and like me, to be his followers, to do his work, to be his presence in the world.

Was this not the experience of both Peter and Paul, those two great “pillars” whose memory the universal Church celebrates today? Indeed, “the biggest miracle is not so much that God can create something out of nothing, but rather that he can make saints out of sinners.” (Kierkegaard)

When we look at the lives of these two great Apostles, whose faith, love, and missionary zeal became the “rock” on which the foundations of our Church have been established, we see two very flawed, imperfect figures. Yet we also see two individuals – different in temperament, personality, experience, and mission – who shared a deep and passionate love for the Lord Jesus, who were willing to face the hard questions Jesus asked them. Inspired by grace, they said “Yes” to the Lord. And to this day, their names are inseparable as pillars of faith: Peter the Rock, the chief of the Apostles; Paul the Missionary, Apostle to the Gentiles.

Consider Simon: a rough, uneducated, Galilean fisherman. Soon after calling him, Jesus renames him Peter (or “Rock”); he obviously saw something in him that the rest of the world might have overlooked, for he soon emerges as leader and spokesperson of the Twelve.

Yet Peter is far from an idealized figure; the Gospels almost go out of their way to stress his humanity, his weakness, his failures, his fear. When Jesus says or does something, Peter often “just doesn’t get it.” He speaks first and thinks later. He makes bold and impetuous claims ... but then fails to measure up. He knows that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ... and then tries to dissuade him from the Cross, from the self-sacrificing love his mission demands. He starts to walk on the water ... and then almost drowns when his fear causes him to lose his focus on Jesus. He boasts that he is ready to die with Jesus ... and then denies him three times. Yet no matter how many times he messes up or gets things wrong, he never gives up or loses hope. Peter knows that Jesus’ love and forgiveness are unconditional: he picks himself up and gets back in the game.

And when the chips were down, when Jesus had an important question to ask him – one that would define who Peter was to become, what the entire Church was destined to become – Peter delivered. That question is addressed not only to Peter, to the disciples who walked this earth with Jesus, but indeed to each of us who call ourselves Christians, who claim fellowship with Jesus: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter’s answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” is inspired not by his native intelligence or theological sophistication, but his radical openness to the God who was revealing himself in Jesus. This is why the Church is not primarily a philosophy, or a legal system, or a moral code – but a community: the fellowship of those who recognize Jesus as Lord and seek to follow him each day.

Throughout Jesus’ earthly life, Peter struggled to understand and live out this insight that came to him as divine gift. Later, after the Resurrection, Jesus had another question to ask him: not about his theological identity, but on the quality and depth of their relationship.

Three times, Jesus asks: “Simon, Son of John, do you love me?” And three times, Peter gives a positive response: “Yes, Lord, you know all things, you know I love you.” Only now can Jesus entrust Peter with the care of his flock. Jesus knows that only someone who is “poor in spirit”, who is in touch with his own imperfections and sinfulness, dependent on the love and forgiveness of a compassionate God, can be trusted to lead a Church also composed of people in constant need of healing, forgiveness, and strengthening in their failures to live that love.

As we see Peter in the first reading today, liberated from his chains of oppression and set free to resume his mission of proclaiming Christ as Risen Lord, we cannot help but think both of the special mission Jesus entrusted to Peter of unbinding others and letting them go free, and of his own eventual destiny to share the fate of his Lord and friend: “When you are older, someone will stretch out your hands and tie a belt around you, and take you where you do not want to go.” Yet in the end, Peter knew that he wanted to be with Jesus: in life, in death, in the promise of eternal life.

And the same, of course, is true of that utterly different figure: Saul of Tarsus, the proud Pharisee, persecutor of the early believers who eventually became Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul never got to meet the earthly Jesus, share a meal with him, walk beside him, listen to his teaching. Yet his life, too, was turned upside-down by a **question**, posed to him in that life-changing conversion on the road to Damascus: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** And the result of that conversation was the transformation of one of the early Church’s most bitter opponents into perhaps its greatest champion. Saul becomes Paul; the persecutor becomes not only one apostle among others, but THE Apostle, the one who would help spread the faith beyond its Jewish origins until it embraced virtually the entire world.

In the Acts of the Apostles, until Paul appears on the scene, Peter and John, the deacons Stephen and Philip, appear to be the prime movers. Afterward, it is Paul’s mission that takes centre stage: his travelling companions Silas, Barnabas, Mark, and Luke himself, being very much in supporting roles.

That Paul had to change travelling companions so often gives us some insight into his temperament: he wasn't always the easiest person to get along with! He was not afraid to take on anybody – including acknowledged Church pillars Peter and James – when he felt that the Gospel message of inclusivity was being compromised. He could be surly and uncompromising in his positions and his conflicts; we see this in his correspondence, captured in the many letters of Paul which make up an important part of our New Testament. But we see also his boldness, his eloquence, his deep desire to spread the Good News of Christ to every part of the world. If Peter is the chief pastor, Paul is the first theologian: he articulates the relation between law and grace, between faith and works, between freedom and responsibility, between individuality and community. Paul was a believer who not only **felt** his faith, but had reflected on it deeply and was able to articulate it in a way that decisively shaped the origins of Christianity. His faith too is a “rock” on which our faith is reliably founded.

Although Peter and Paul experienced conflict – in particular, over the extent to which the followers of Jesus were bound by Jewish laws and traditions – ultimately, there is no contradiction in their teaching, just a different emphasis. They share a unity of purpose rooted in their common love of Christ, their willingness to be faithful to Christ even unto death. Tradition teaches us that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome – the educated Pharisee from Tarsus and the simple fisherman from Capernaum – united in their common witness to Christ, even when faced with death. Peter, the rock, and Paul, in the words of today's 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, “poured out as a libation.” The two images – solid and fluid, the rooted one and the missionary – illustrating their different nature, but their common purpose. The rock allowed himself to be crushed, crucified upside-down; the libation poured out, beheaded on the outskirts of the city, loving Jesus to the end after having “run the race and fought the good fight.”

In the prayer corner in my room, I often light a candle in front of my favourite icon, painted by the Orthodox Monks from the island of Mt. Athos in Greece. It shows Peter and Paul embracing, reunited and reconciled at the last. Though different in so many ways, they remain inseparable in the memory of the Church.

*“Peter and Paul did not see eye to eye, yet their shared mission to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought about the Church as we know it today. And 2000 years later, the Church has endured – through misconceptions and corruptions, dark ages and power struggles, inquisitions and reformations, saints and sinners, scandals and schisms, wealth and poverty, compromise and prophetic witness – all rising from the example and witness of two very flawed, yet wounded healers.”*

So let us call upon the intercession of these two great pillars, Peter and Paul: may they inspire in us a deeper knowledge and love of Christ, and a deeper commitment to follow Him, as members of his Body, the Church. Amen.