

Feast of Ss. Peter & Paul
Ezekiel 34.11-16/II Timothy 4.1-8 /John 21.15-19
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
29 June 2008

WHAT KIND OF A CHURCH?

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today we worship Christ with the help of the memory of two great saints. They are part of that 'great cloud of witnesses' which surrounds on our life-long pilgrimage, according to the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. These are the saints who have gone ahead of us, and 'have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith' as we have just heard. They cheer us on as fellow saints, fellow Christians who have moved on to the next stage of their pilgrimage, beyond this earthly life.

Today *Nicholas MacDonald* joins them and us as a fellow saint. What sort of church is it that he is entering? Why don't we think about what we are doing today, as Ss. Peter and Paul accompany Christians at worship around the world?

Not everyone has had a chance to see the comedy in us celebrating, together on the same day, the memory of the two greatest church leaders recorded in our Scriptures, St. Peter and St. Paul. And yet the earliest evidence amongst the ruins of first-century Rome is that Peter and Paul were remembered together after their deaths, from the beginning, as founders of the church in Rome.

The comedy is not just that Roman Catholics now see Peter as the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope-- and that the protestant protesters of the Reformation quoted St. Paul more than any other saint as they attacked the Papacy. In fact, Peter and Paul didn't really get along together very well in the early years of Christianity.

Thank God that God took this comedy of human frailty and even built the church of Christ with Christians such as Peter and Paul. Certainly St. Paul's, Halifax, was built upon the foundation of the apostles, and named in honour of the greatest of them all.

From one point of view, it not hard to understand why the two apostles were sometimes at odds.

Peter was the first disciple called by Jesus according to St. Matthew and the last one with whom Jesus had a conversation—and a long one as we have heard—according to St. John's Gospel. St. Peter waxed bold and then wavered and retreated, finally and famously denying Christ before being forgiven. Four hundred years later St. Augustine summed up the Apostle

Peter: ‘ that denier and lover, elated by presuming, prostrate by denying, cleansed by weeping, proven by confessing, crowned by suffering.’¹

But *Paul* never met the earthly Jesus: ‘Last of all,’ Paul said ‘[Christ] appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle.’² But he met the risen Christ, some years after the church was born, in a blinding vision that turned him overnight from a persecutor of all Christians into a fearless champion of the Gospel until his death in Rome, probably in 64 a.d., along with Peter.

There is more. *Peter* came from a fishing village in the uncouth and semi-pagan north country;

Galilee, far from the capital of Jerusalem, separated from the mother province of Judea by the heretical Samaria. Peter was not a man of breeding or education, and not distinguished in speech or diplomacy.

Paul, on the other hand, was as he put it, ‘circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee.’³ And he was not just any Pharisee, not just any rabbi. As he said elsewhere to his critics, he was ‘brought up in this city [of Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, [perhaps the most important rabbi of his day] educated strictly according to [the] ancestral law, being zealous for God.’⁴

And of course, the Apostles in general and Peter and Paul in particular disagreed so much about some things, at some points, that they helped created factions in the church, which the apostles came to regret. St. Paul said, in frustration to the leaders of the church in Corinth: ‘It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos” or “I belong to Cephas (i.e. Peter) or “I belong to Christ”. Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?’⁵ No. No. No.

But yes, we do confess that God built his church with people like us, imperfect people—sometimes sinning against others, sometimes being sinned against. What binds us together is what God does for all of us, and what we do in response for the rest of the world.

¹ *Tractate 123 in Tractates on the Gospel of John: 112-124*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p.76.

² *I Corinthians* 15.8-9: All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ *Philippians* 3.5.

⁴ *Acts* 22.3.

⁵ *I Corinthians* 1.11-13.

We confess that God's way with the world is like the way of a good shepherd with the sheep in his care. When the prophet Ezekiel wrote the words we have just heard the people of God had been in exile for awhile, many far from the place of their birth, or the place of their parents' birth.

So they heard the prophet's words about God's action: 'I myself will search for my sheep...I will rescue them from the all the places to which they have been scattered...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.'

The Christian church has, from the beginning found its identity, its hope, in God as the shepherd that gathers and restores his sheep in one flock. And the church from the beginning turned to the ancient people of God, both their prophets and to their psalms to hear this, as we have done this morning. What does the Psalmist say about God: 'Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia.' A bit of a surprise!

God spoke of gathering not just the exiled Israelites, but spoke also of including the traditional enemies of Israel, with whom they had often gone to war. The people of God worshipped the God who gathered, like a shepherd, the whole human flock. So the early church was asked to begin to celebrate God's action in the midst of our differences, our arguments, our hostilities.

We are never encouraged to build a church made out of people 'just like us.'

We are encouraged to let God build Christ's church out of all those that are meant to be found together, out of all the variety of God's complicated flock. We are assured that God is the God who gathers, who is bringing us together to strengthen and heal us and our community.

This meant the apostles too. St. Paul put it this way to the Corinthians a few chapters after his first outburst. 'Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas [i.e.] Peter or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all things belong to you and belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.'⁶

So on this day of St. Peter and St. Paul we confess that God's way with the world is like the way of a good shepherd with the sheep in his care. God gathers us.

But it doesn't end here. The second truth is that God gathers us so that together in order that we might gather the world.

⁶ *I Corinthians 3.21-23.*

‘Feed my sheep,’ Jesus said, over and over to St. Peter in one conversation. Poor Peter—‘he felt hurt’ is the English translation of his response. Sometimes God’s commission to us wounds our hearts, because we think that hearing the word from God is the same as actually comprehending it, letting it sink down into our soul, letting it work away at us. But it was no time for Jesus to let Peter feel sorry for himself.

Jesus said that if Peter was to be a shepherd he would be giving up the illusion that he was in charge of his life and the lives of others. It took awhile for this to sink in. Jesus prepared him by saying God’s will, not Peter’s, would be done on earth as in heaven.

St. Paul understood it later: ‘I am already being poured out as a libation’ he said. The meaning of his life was not in the pain of self-sacrifice for sheep in his care. We don’t serve a God who enjoys our pain. Rather, the meaning of St. Paul’s life was in the way his life for others was an act of love for the great shepherd of all sheep. As the ancient Hebrew priest poured out wine or oil on the altar to be consumed with fire, so the apostle’s life was consumed with his care of his sheep.

This may all seem a little too dramatic for us, and far too frightening to be helpful for us. But the truth is we only really live when we live for others. There is no future for us in hoarding our life, in hedging all our options. It is why our remembering Christ’s sacrifice for us in the Eucharist is the key act of Christian worship around the world this morning.

We are a church which celebrates Christ’s sacrificial love for us. It is this love known and experienced which creates, enlivens, animates our love for others. It is why we come to worship, it is why we offer our time, our abilities, our possessions for the work of the shepherd, for the work of gathering, and healing and restoring Christ’s flock, inside and outside the doors of our church building or our houses.

This is the sort of church, the flock, into which we welcome the baptized, which *Nicholas* enters this morning. It was big enough for both St. Peter and St. Paul to be gathered into it, so its big enough for anyone already in this parish, or anyone who might enter it.

But at the same time this flock is small enough, intimate enough for anyone to be healed and restored. Because we are all at the same time the Lord’s sheep and shepherds for each other. It’s how our God does God’s work, if we’ll allow it.