

**SS Peter and Paul**  
**29 June 2008**  
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“On this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”

Today we celebrate two greatest figures of the early Christian churches, Peter and Paul. Both were recognized leaders by the early churches, and both were martyred in Rome. Yet, the two couldn't be more different from each other.

Peter was a humble fisherman from a small village of Bethsaida on the north shore of Sea of Galilee in Palestine. This is not to say that he was poor and ignorant by all means. Peter's family probably had some status in this small rural community. But Peter wasn't as worldly and learned as Paul, who was a tent maker by trade from a large commercial city of Tarsus in the present-day Turkey. Paul was a Pharisee taught by Gamaliel, a famous Rabbi at the time, and was most likely being groomed to be a rabbi himself. His family also had enough status and wealth to purchase the Roman citizenship.

There is also a big difference in the way they were called to their new vocation. Having been introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew, Peter immediately became Jesus' disciple and began to follow him around on his mission together with other disciples. His journey with Jesus led him to nowhere else than Calvary in the end.

Paul, on the other hand, was a leading persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Most likely he never met Jesus in person. Paul was still a young man, when he had Stephen the Deacon stoned to death. His hard-heartedness required a more dramatic intervention. On his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, a voice called out his name and Paul became blind. He was met by a Christian named Ananias who took him to the Christian community in Damascus and nursed him back to new life and new faith in Christ.

One significant thing they do have in common: with a new identity came a new life and a new vocation for both of them. Simon Bar-Jonah was given a new name, Petros, whose new mission was to be the foundation for a new *ekklēsia*, a new assembly, against which even the powers of death could not prevail. As we just heard in Acts, Peter was miraculously freed from the prison in Jerusalem, being rescued from a possible execution and, as commonly believed, fled to Rome from there. Like a foundation rock, Peter didn't move around but remained in Rome, building up the new *ekklēsia* there.

Saul was given a new name, Paul, who would become the Apostle to the Gentiles, building up many new assemblies in the diaspora – in Corinth, Thessaloniki, Galatia, Ephesus and in Rome. Just as he had moved about everywhere to persecute the Christians, the new Paul would move about as the Holy Spirit led him in order to build up new communities. But, they had a very different mission and ministry from each other. They represent two foundational ethos of Christianity.

Peter was the first to confess the fundamental faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It is for this confession, for this faith, that Jesus called him the rock, upon which his church would be built and gave him the keys of kingdom of heaven. Whether he correctly understood the meaning and the implication of that faith is something else, however. Right after today's Gospel passage, Jesus talks about his suffering and death at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and about his resurrection on the third day. Peter rebukes Jesus, saying this must never happen to him, and Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter, saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan." The foundation rock one moment, Satan the next. There was something endearingly human about Peter. Over and over again he confessed the right thing at the right time, but he is also seen putting his foot in his mouth, as bishops are often inclined to do.

With the same conviction of faith in Jesus Christ, Paul is often said to have interpreted and gave theological meaning to that faith both in his words and in his mission. He put to good use his former rabbinical training and zeal for persecution. His letter to the Romans has been the most important treasure of the Church throughout the ages, inspiring many theologians from Augustine to the present day. In today's reading from 2 Timothy, we see Paul having no regret over his life and likening himself as a libation, a drink offering in a religious sacrifice. He clearly offered his whole life and his blood in the end as a sacrifice to God.

If a humble fisherman like Peter who quite did not understand what he himself was confessing even to the point of denying that Jesus was his lord three times at a critical moment, if he could be inspired to be a foundation rock for Jesus' mission, if a persecutor like Paul could be converted to become Apostle to the Gentiles, what more could the Holy Spirit do with each and everyone of us today?

But, there is cost for Jesus' mission. Jesus himself had to pay for it and his disciples must likewise pay for it.

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The word, rock, *petra* in Greek, is used four times in Matthew: Twice in chapter 7 where Jesus talks about building a house on rock rather than on sand; The third is in today's reading from chapter 16; The fourth occurs in chapter 27, when Joseph of Arimathea claims the body of Jesus back from Pilate and buries him in his own tomb which he had hewn in the rock. The rock of the parable which would give firm foundation to a house and the rock upon which the church was to be built are the same rock which preserved the dead body of Jesus for three days and saw him resurrected to new life.

The rock is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, into which all Christians are called to participate. The Christian paradigm of life is death and resurrection, the life of Sacrament, the life of sacrificial offering to God. It is only upon this rock, we root our faith, put our hope and build our life both individually and collectively as an *ekklēsia*.

When blind faith sets in, hope has no ground and suffering no purpose. When hope has no real ground, false hopes will blind us, and when suffering has no purpose, blind suffering triumphs, and meaninglessness and hopelessness get better of the society. Both suffering and hope must be embodied and concretized by the "hopeful" suffering of Christ. There can be no authentic hope in

the Church unless it is willing to suffer for its hope in Christ in its daily life. Just as suffering without hope degenerates into passive resignation, cynicism, and despair so hope without a relation to suffering degenerates into false hope and cheap grace.

In today's culture religion is not taken seriously and treated like a fad or a hobby, even by those who profess to believe, rather than as the fundamental upon which believers build their lives, and the Church its common life and its mission of witnessing to love of God. In order for Christianity to be taken seriously once again, we the Christian believers must first rebuild our faith on the rock of the death and resurrection of Christ and restore our hope in the crucified Christ. The apostolic *ekklesia* is the assembly to which individuals are called out for public service and as a community is sent out into the world to bring the hopeful message of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

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Over two thousand years ago these words Jesus proclaimed to Peter and his fellow disciples as a prophecy of hope. Rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ these words have not faded away and lost their power. Rather, they continue to offer us hope, calling us out of our self-absorption to this holy assembly to be the sacrament of God to the world.