

2. THE PATRON SAINTS



Peter, leader of the Apostles, died in Rome, around 64 AD. He was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, married and brother of St Andrew, with whom he was called to follow Christ and be a 'fisher of men'. Originally he was called Simon; but Jesus gave him the Aramaic title of Kephaz, meaning 'rock'. The English equivalent is 'Peter', the name by which we know him. The title was explained when, in reply to Peter's declaration 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God', the Lord said to him, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church', and conferred on him 'the keys of the kingdom of Heaven', and the power of 'binding and loosing' afterwards extended to the other apostles. The New Testament gives ample evidence of Peter's unique position among the apostles, and also makes clear his earlier misunderstanding of Christ's messiahship, and the warm impetuosity of his character. Within a few hours of assuring his Master 'Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee,' he in fact denied all knowledge of him three times to the Jewish high priest's servants. But after the resurrection Peter was the first of the apostles to whom Jesus appeared: and subsequently the risen Lord elicited a three-fold assurance of his love; whereupon Jesus reiterated Peter's responsibilities: 'Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep'.

This St Peter did boldly and faithfully. He was the leader of the Christian community. He directed that the place among the apostles left vacant by Judas Iscariot be filled; he addressed the crowd at Pentecost; he did miracles in Christ's name - his very shadow was health-giving; he passed sentence on Ananias and Sapphira; twice he refused to be silenced by the Jewish council; he admitted the first Gentile, Cornelius, to baptism; he was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa, and escaped through divine intervention; he made missionary and pastoral visits to Samaria, Antioch, and other places. At Antioch he was reproved by St Paul for temporizing over eating with Gentiles; afterwards Peter spoke strongly against imposing the obligation of circumcision on Gentiles.

The researches of modern scholars have done much to confirm the tradition that St Peter eventually went to Rome and was put to death there. That he was martyred under Nero is undisputed; it is said that he was crucified head downward at his own request. Tradition again points to a spot below where the altar of the Vatican basilica stands as his burial-place.

It is generally agreed that Mark's gospel represents Peter's teaching. Other early works claiming St Peter as their author, or written about him, are apocryphal; one of them the Acts of Peter, is the source of the story that the saint, fleeing from persecution in Rome, met Christ on the road and asked him 'Lord where are you going?' - 'Quo vadis Domine?' Christ answered, 'I am coming to be crucified again', and thereupon Peter turned back to meet his martyrdom.

St Peter is symbolized in art by two crossed keys. His feast date is 29 June, shared with St Paul.



Paul, apostle of the Gentiles, was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, and died in Rome around 67 AD. Until his conversion, Paul was known as Saul. He inherited Roman citizenship from his Jewish father, who brought him up as a strict Pharisee. Saul studied his religion under Rabbi Gamaliel at Jerusalem, and learned the trade of a tentmaker. As a young man he was present and consenting when St Stephen was stoned to death. Afterwards he 'made havoc of the church', searching out Christians and handing them over to prison and even death. Then, while on the way to Damascus to persecute there, he had a sudden vision, in which Jesus Christ rebuked him and told him he was destined to take the Christian faith to the Gentiles. Paul was duly baptized, and retired for a time to Arabia. He then returned to Damascus, but after three years his Jewish enemies became so threatening that he had to make his escape by night, being lowered over the city wall in a basket. From thence, he went to Jerusalem, 'to see Peter', whom later he 'withstood to the face' because of his uncertain attitude in the disagreement about Gentile converts and Jewish observances. This happened at Antioch, the metropolis of the East, to which Paul had been called to help St Barnabas in his work of evangelization: it was the beginning of the great mission to the Gentiles. Their converts raised a fund for the relief of the famine-stricken Christian community at Jerusalem, and Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to take it there.

From about the year 45 St Paul was on his three principle missionary journeys, beginning with Cyprus and going hither and thither in Asia Minor, Syria, Macedonia, and Greece (Acts xiii-xx). In each town he first preached in the Jewish synagogue before addressing himself to the heathen. At the end of a dozen years he went to Jerusalem, and his presence there caused such disorder that he was taken into custody by the Roman governor. After two years he appealed for trial in the emperor's court, and was sent to Rome, being shipwrecked in Malta on the way. He remained under house arrest in Rome for two years, and thereafter his movements are uncertain. He may have been condemned at his trial, and then executed; or he may have been acquitted, for there is some indication that he revisited Ephesus and other places, and perhaps even went to Spain. He would then have been again arrested, brought to Rome once more, and there put to death. In either case the tradition is that he was beheaded at the place now called Tre Fontane, and his body buried where the church of St Paul outside the Walls stands. The belief that Peter and Paul were martyred on the same day is probably due to the fact that they have a joint feast day.

A second-century document depicts Paul as a man of unimpressive physical presence ('small, bald, bow-legged'); the Acts and the Epistles testify to the loftiness of his spiritual stature and the transcendent qualities of his mind. For he was a great deal more than a tireless and powerful missionary: as religious thinker he has been, through his letters, a profound and enduring formative influence in the development of Christianity, and his greatness of mind and spirit become more apparent as the centuries pass.

The symbols of St Paul in art are a sword and a book. His feast date is 29 June, shared with St Peter.

FEASTS OF SS PETER AND PAUL

As early as the fourth century a feast was celebrated in memory of SS Peter and Paul on the same day, although the day was not the same in the East as in Rome. The Syrian Martyrology of the end of the fourth century gives the following feasts in connection with Christmas: 28 December, SS Peter and Paul.

The chief feast of SS Peter and Paul was celebrated in Rome on 29 June in the Via Appia *ad Catacumbas* from 258 when the remains of the Apostles were transferred there. Later, the remains were restored to their former resting-place - Peter's to the Vatican Basilica, and Paul's to the church on the Via Ostiensis. A church was also built in *Ad Catacumbas* as early as the fourth century in honour of the two Apostles. The memory of both Peter and Paul was also later associated with the Via Sacra, outside the Forum, and the prison *Tullianum*, or *Carcer Mamertinus*, where the Apostles were supposed to have been kept until their execution. At both these places shrines of the Apostles were erected, and that of the Mamertine Prison still remains in almost its original form.

Reflections on the Mass for the Feast Day of St Peter and Paul

The earliest disciples of Jesus were Jews who continued, after Jesus' execution and resurrection, to observe Jewish laws of behaviour and worship. They were Jewish Christians. They felt obliged to continue Jesus' preaching in Jerusalem in the hope that all their compatriots would accept Jesus as Messiah. They were sometimes arrested and imprisoned for promoting a hostile sect within Judaism. But they were released after a beating, time and again. Today's first reading (Acts, iii: 1-10) marks a change in attitude towards the apostles. Herod had James beheaded. He had popular support. He then went after Peter, head of the apostles. In this way persecution touched the whole community of early Christians. They were to experience the same ordeal as their Master. They would seem to be deserted as was Jesus. But, they would also be delivered by God as was Jesus. Happily, Peter's arrest and deliverance occurred around Passover time when all faithful Jews were remembering their ancestors' deliverance from Egypt. They were assembled in prayer, powerfully interceding on behalf of their leader. It was God's plan to keep his church from the power of evil. The symbolism of this event is more important than the historical details.

The responsorial psalm, 'The Lord has set me free from all my fears' (Ps, 33) links the two main scripture readings. On a personal note, I have been blessed to have been in a parish named after SS Peter and Paul from 1973 until now! I have wondered over and over why Peter and Paul, the twin pillars of the church were never separated in either the ancient liturgy or in iconography. Is it as the Glennstal missal notes, 'Between institution and charism there must always be dialogue, even if, at times it leads to tension, for the Church must progress in the knowledge and practice of the truth.'

In the Gospel from Matthew (Matt., xvi: 13-19), we have the well-known incident when Jesus commissioned Peter as 'Rock' and 'door-keeper'. Later, after the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, Our Lord commissioned Paul as 'my chosen instrument to bring my name to the pagan nations'. The earliest Church was both conservative, out of sensitivity to the Jewish Christians and innovative out of sensitivity to the Greek Christians. There was tension between the two parties. Peter was eventually convinced that there had been two Pentecosts: one for the Jews in Jerusalem, another for the pagan family of Cornelius at Caesarea. Paul soon reported to Peter and the Church at Jerusalem that the spirit was at work wherever he preached to non-Jews far from Jerusalem. Local Churches in our own day need to be faithful to both Peter and Paul by keeping the faith and adventurously sharing it with others.

Father Bob Maguire, 29 June 1997