

St Peter or St Paul – which would you choose, and why? Headstrong St Peter, the one Jesus called ‘rocky’; the one who deserted Jesus at his hour of need? Or St Paul – the one with the Damascus road Experience, persecutor turned evangelist, some would say too definite in his teachings for their liking... (PPT)

Those of you who know your Prayer Book well will be aware that the Prayer Book assigns 29<sup>th</sup> June to St Peter alone. Commemorating Peter and Paul together is for the church of England quite a recent development. When Archbishop Cranmer put the prayer book together he issued a revised calendar of apostles and saints for the reformed, Biblical Church of England.

Keeping the feasts of apostles was biblically important; after all, in Ephesians we read that the Church is ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The faith we profess is the faith handed down from the first followers of Jesus and celebrated in the New Testament.

St Paul, as you might know, already had a festival day, the feast of his Conversion on 25 January. So, the 29<sup>th</sup> of June was given to Peter in his own right. But, the much older tradition, established in the Third Century, was a double commemoration of both Peter and Paul. Why? Because these two pre-eminent apostles were both martyred in Rome in the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero around 64AD. While there no evidence they were martyred on the same day, as in an ancient tradition, they were certainly executed in the same place and time relatively speaking, though after the book of acts concludes, That ends with Paul in Rome. Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded; Peter was crucified, upside-down as tradition tells us, as a sign of his unworthiness to die exactly like his Lord.

So, today here in St Peter and St Paul Cudham – probably the dedication of the church from its foundation we now keep this ancient festival, rejoicing in both Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, and Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, two followers of Jesus who witnessed together to Christ in life and in death.

Our bible readings today reflect on both of them – I didn’t choose the conversion of Paul, though it’s well worth reading that again from the book of acts when you get home, nor an extract Peter’s letters, written as they were for Christians throughout the known world of the time, with their teaching of how we live in uncertain times – times not unlike our own, and keeping therefore in mind the promise of life with Jesus when we put our faith and trust in him; it might be worth us looking in detail at Peter’s letters sometime in a sermon series – let me know what you think? – instead, these two short passages we heard a few moments ago; let’s have a look at them now.

In writing to a group of young largely Greek/roman/gentile Christians in Ephesus, Paul seems to be answering questions that a ‘panel’ have asked him about how they should live out their faith in an environment where people around them lived with little morality, if they worshipped at all they had a multiplicity of faiths and beliefs, and although they knew that their new found faith in Jesus made a difference to their lives, they weren’t sure how far that difference should be seen. They are not very different from us, in other words. Paul commends a radical difference in lifestyle in order to show love for the Jesus who has rescued them from darkness into light; Jesus who has brought them into a living relationship with God, and therefore with each others as brothers and sisters. See Eph ch4v17 (page 1177) – do not live any longer as the gentiles do; the rest of the chapter that follows gives clear examples of good practice. And so to our passage, helpfully introduced (ch 6:10) with the word ‘finally’; and here’s where we get back to where we started. Ephesians 1:3 and 1 Peter 1:3 are remarkably similar, and Peter and Paul are in a remarkably similar place – in prison in Rome probably knowing that execution for following Jesus is not too far away. That alone might make us think – how far are we prepared to go to stand up for Jesus. Even more startling then is that Paul uses the visual aid in front of him in Eph 6:11-17 – the roman soldier in full armour, as an example – (ppt) my guess not so cute looking as this one.... Have a look, says Paul- see how you can be equipped for battle against sin, fully armoured – God has provided all you need, with the belt of the truth of God’s word, the breastplate of God’s righteousness found in Jesus, ready to go out to share the gospel of peace. For this you will need living faith in Jesus as a shield, knowing that we are saved

because of the helmet of salvation, and (crest ppt) having the sword of the spirit, God's word the bible. Hang on to this image, says Paul, when trouble comes. This trouble comes from many different sources, those things that would distract or disturb our faith – maybe we should have read on to v18 – knowing the power of prayer; and praying for each other. This Paul, converted on that road to Damascus, knew what trials meant, and also knew how to be equipped for them.

In our Gospel reading, we see something of the faith of St Peter too; so let's turn to Matthew 16:13-19 (p983). Jesus had been teaching healing, and showing God's power in feeding a whole group of people. They had begun to realise that this man in front of them was more than a teacher or a prophet, and some had begun to glimpse that this Jesus extraordinary love could only lead to one conclusion. In last week's reading from Mark 4 as Jesus calms the storm the disciples question was 'who is this', here it's Jesus that asks the question directly to his followers. He's saying – you've seen the evidence, now comes the point of having to make a decision. First, Jesus eases them in gently – who do people say I am – Jeremiah, Elijah, John the Baptist, one of the prophets – some think, Jesus, you are like one of them – why isn't this enough? Why isn't it enough to just have a vague idea of who Jesus might be – he's a bit like... a comparative exercise, no need to be personally challenged. But then Jesus does (v15) what about you? Who do you say I am? I wonder at this point what the disciples were thinking – maybe they'd got an idea, but as usual, it's Peter that gets there first – V16 – and Peter states two truths 1) you are the messiah – Rooting Jesus in old testament promise now fulfilled and 2) you are the son of the living God – using what he's heard Jesus say and seen Jesus do to proclaim a new yet profound truth. Standing in front of him is no ordinary man, or even God's messiah, but God himself in human form. This is faith at work (v17) God works in and through us when we are open to him, to discover the truth in his word, and in Jesus works. So Peter is given that challenging job to do to establish God's church on earth; a church built on faith alone; and for that he will need to be equipped for the task – the keys of the kingdom; in other words the responsibility to unlock in people's lives a relationship with God the Father, because of Jesus forgiveness won on the cross (v21). Faith in Jesus Christ, unlocking the kingdom in people's lives means defeating all that the evil one wants to do. That's the truth that Peter discovered that day. Yet, read on a few verses, and just like you and me, Peter reveals his human weaknesses once again. What a great privilege we have that we can come back to God again and again because of the cross!

Peter or Paul – which might you choose – both.

I've said before that I've always been intrigued by the niche above the entrance door of the church – did it ever have a statue in it? I prefer to think not, and to recollect that old tradition that it's meant to be empty, with (image in porch). We've seen in these two bible passages God at work in people's lives, especially in Peter and Paul, and how the extraordinariness of Jesus can work through the weakness of people like Peter and Paul, and so you and me too. You could be in that niche – not because of us, but because of the faith of Peter and Paul, faith in Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, the one who equips us by his spirit and fills us with his love. Amen.