

I wonder if the thought has ever crossed your mind, as it has mine, that it is rather curious that, whereas nearly all the apostles and evangelists have a feast day to themselves, Peter and Paul, surely two of the great leaders of the church in the years immediately after the resurrection, are obliged to share one. Only Philip and James, and Simon and Jude, apostles of whom we know very little - or at least I do - also share feast days.

It is, of course, true that St Paul gets a second bite of the cherry on 25 January, the day when we mark his conversion and Peter gets a sort of second bite on 22 February which is designated as the Feast of the Chair of St Peter by the Roman Catholic Church but not, as far as I can see, by the CofE.

Nonetheless it is rather odd, at least on the face of it that two such pre-eminent leaders of the very early church should share a feast day. I wonder why. My research took me initially to a website with the interesting title of www.bustedhalo.com which told me that legend has it that they were executed on the same day under the command of Emperor Nero and buried in Rome - although historical accounts cite Peter as being martyred in 64 AD and Paul three years later in 67 AD. This website adds that as early as 258 AD, there is evidence of an already-lengthy tradition that both St. Peter and St. Paul were celebrated on the same day. The explanation more generally accepted seems to be that they were, in effect, co-founders of the church in Rome, through their preaching, ministry and martyrdom there. But the two are in many ways as unlike as chalk and cheese and clearly did not always see eye to eye. However both were clearly dedicated to the spread of the Christian faith.

Peter, as we know, was a fisherman of Galilee and was introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew, also a fisherman, and generally regarded as fairly uneducated. But, as we heard in today's Gospel, he was the first to recognize that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus gave him the name Cephas (Petrus in Latin), which means 'Rock,' because he was to become the rock upon which Christ would build His Church. An unlikely choice for this crucial role because, as we know from the Gospels, he was, although a willing and devoted disciple of Jesus, impetuous, inconstant and unreliable.

He walked on the water in faith, but then sank in doubt. He refused to let Jesus wash his feet, but then wanted his whole body cleansed. He swore at the Last Supper that he would never deny Jesus, and soon afterwards swore to a servant maid that he had never known the man. He loyally resisted the first attempt to arrest Jesus by cutting off Malchus's ear, but in

the end he ran away with the others. Yet despite his human weaknesses, or perhaps because of them, Peter was chosen to be shepherd of God's flock.

St. Paul was the Apostle of the Gentiles. His letters are included in the writings of the New Testament, and through them we learn much about his life and the faith of the early Church.

Before receiving the name Paul, he was Saul, a Jewish pharisee who zealously persecuted Christians in Jerusalem. He had been the most Pharisaic of Pharisees, the most legalistic of Mosaic lawyers.

The story of Saul's conversion is so well known that the phrase "a road to Damascus" experience has become embedded in the English language as a description of a sudden change of heart or moment of enlightenment. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

These words are so well known and, as we also know, Saul continued to Damascus, where he was baptized and his sight was restored. He took the name Paul and spent the remainder of his life preaching the Gospel tirelessly to the Gentiles of the Mediterranean world.

Paul's central conviction was simple and absolute: Only God can save humanity. No human effort—even the most scrupulous observance of law—can create a human good which we can bring to God as reparation for sin.

Paul, famously, suffered from some form of physical or mental complaint or disability described in his second epistle to the Corinthians: "in order to keep me from becoming conceited," writes Paul, "I was given a thorn in my flesh, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

So if Peter and Paul share a feast day; what may we learn from this? Perhaps that God wants called a wide spectrum of people in his service, with very different backgrounds and abilities including fishermen and Pharisees, the impulsive and the intellectual, and he certainly wants all of us here to bring our talents and qualities to his service. But perhaps equally as important, it does not matter that we have failings and human weaknesses, and we might think ourselves unworthy or lacking in talent in some way. He still wants us to be in his service. "My grace is

sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So we must all try, trusting in God’s grace even if we make mistakes and blunders, and keep on trying.

St Paul in his letters gives much encouragement and guidance about how we can follow Christ and he uses frequent sporting analogies in his epistles to illustrate his message; perhaps the best known is in 1 Corinthians 9:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”

In a summer with so much sport - the football European Championship, England historically beating Australia for the first time in a Rugby test series, Wimbledon about to start and, perhaps most relevantly, the Olympic Games a month away - it is appropriate to dwell on this.

In the words I have just quoted the emphasis is on running to win a race competitively which bothers me a bit because to me it does not really sound like the Christian life as I understand it. Am I, and all of you, the parishioners of Geddington, in a competitive race and only the winner wins eternal life? I think not. So what was Paul’s real meaning? We get a clue in today’s reading from the epistle to Timothy when he says “I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness”. What is Paul trying to convey?

I will turn to a present day authority for a bit of help with this. A few weeks ago, while on duty as a volunteer steward at Lyveden New Bield on a wet and cold day (of which there has been no shortage in recent months), when trade was slack, I went and had a nosy in the second hand bookstall there and my eye was caught by the title of a slim volume: Basil in Blunderland. The Basil in question was Cardinal Basil Hulme who was the author of the book. Intrigued by the title and by a quick flip through the contents I bought it and read it. Talking about spiritual life, he illustrates a point he wants to make by reference to the Caucus race in Alice in Wonderland. Those familiar with the Alice books may recall that there had been a great flooding and all the animals and birds were wet and bedraggled:

How were they to get dry again? Then the Dodo had an idea: a Caucus-race. “What is a Caucus-race?” said Alice?” “Why,” said the Dodo, “the best way to explain it is to do it“. A race-course had to be marked out. Then the race began. There was no ‘one, two, three and

away'. Everyone started running when they liked, and left off when it pleased them. Then the Dodo suddenly called out: "The race is over!" Who has won?, the question was. The Dodo said: "Everybody has won and all must have prizes".

Basil Hulme's comments:

There is here an important theological point. Life is like a race. It begins and it ends. In the race organised by God, everyone wins. But - and this is quite essential - you have to be involved in the race otherwise you don't get a prize. In God's world everyone is a winner. But you must take part in the race.....Listen again to what the Dodo said about the Caucus-race: "the best way to explain it is to do it". So get involved even if your attempt seems to be a blundering one".

Obviously, the analogy with the Caucus race is not an exact one as we are bound to keep running to the end of our lives, not stop when we feel like it, but with that proviso we are back with my conclusion when speaking of Peter and Paul. We must all try to follow Christ, and keep trying throughout our lives, despite our many failings, trusting in God's grace even if we make mistakes and blunders along the way if we are to win the crown of which Paul speaks.

Amen