

## Sermon for Ss. Peter and Paul 2015

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be inspired by the Spirit and acceptable to Almighty God; immortal, invisible all-knowing and all-seeing; to whom all desires are known and no secrets can be hidden. Amen

It is thought that St Mary Magdalene's Church building began its life as a stone structure of very moderate proportion. There is clear evidence that a small square Saxon church was already in existence around 950AD, and anything up to 150 years earlier. But it is even more likely that this was not the first church to have been built on this site. Saxon stone structures generally replaced earlier smaller wooden buildings. So who knows when the first church was built?

Now, if you were to walk from Corby Euro-Hub to Geddington Church, you would be considerably more breathless than if you walked in the opposite direction. That is because walking towards Geddington brings you up a small hill. In fact, if you were able to walk parallel from the Church you would find yourself many, many feet in the air by the time you got to the Euro-Hub. So high, in fact, that if that were reversed you would find yourself quite a way up the outside of the Church tower. Of course, you would not be able to stay suspended in mid-air for very long and as you fell down the tower; noting the beautiful architecture and stained glass as you did so, you would inevitably land with a bump followed by quite a lot of pain as you hit the solid rock on which the village is built. But actually, what felt like solid rock wouldn't be, because what you have fallen on is the building work of hundreds of years. The village has undergone considerable changes in architecture and population through the centuries and will continue to in years to come. Each time one layer is knocked down or demolished so the new is built on top: built not only on the solid rock of the earth, but also on the experience and the debris of previous generations.

Many villages often see their centres on small hills, built on the burial grounds of long forgotten chieftains, but we also see a similar thing in our day to day lives as well. The days of the week, for instance, are named after old roman gods and have been adopted by the Christian Church for use in our weekley calendar. Church vestments and robes are modelled on the ancient servant's tunic of the Roman household, designed to communicate authentically the self-denying service of those serving at our Holy Altar. We have a curious ability to assimilate and build on that which has been important to those who came before us.

Today, we remember the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, who guided the early church just after the time of Jesus. Both died as early martyrs for the faith. Peter was crucified upside down in Rome and Paul was beheaded somewhere between Rome and the sea. Whilst each of these saints of the Church had their faults, they are nonetheless extremely important to us and every church community as we strive to build an authentic Christian Church community.

Despite popular myth, Peter was not the founder of the Church in Rome, that was Paul. Peter actually founded the Church in Antioch. Peter did however become an influential church leader in Rome by the time of his death. In the Gospels, we see Peter as an impetuous character, telling Jesus that he would die with him on Holy Thursday<sup>1</sup>, only then a few hours later to deny Jesus three times whilst

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:37

Jesus was on his way to the cross. We also remember Peter's objection, out of concern for Jesus, when Jesus' predicts his own suffering and death, with Jesus' harsh sounding response to him: 'Get behind me Satan, because you have your mind set on human ways, and not on God's way'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Peter had a heart as big as a stone and it was his propensity for love that eventually made him the most suitable candidate to lead God's Church. It is not that he always gets it right, but he is sincere and genuine. In the Acts of the Apostles, we begin to see why Jesus shortly before his death entrusts Peter to look after his flock, the Church,<sup>3</sup> because he would become the 'rock' on which it would be built.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the Acts of the Apostles we see this leadership in action; sometimes he acts with gentleness and care and other times with what looks like rather extreme hard handed authority.

It is believed that Peter was illiterate and the two letters from Peter were written on his behalf by a scribe. Mark's gospel is also thought to have been written on his behalf, using his eye witness accounts as a main source of authority.

Paul was a very controversial character in his own way too. He had a fiery personality. In his early life, he channelled that fire towards persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Then he moves from being the Church's greatest enemy, to one of its greatest leaders. After his conversion, he returned to Tarsus for 10 whole years to pray and figure out why exactly God had chosen him. I wonder what those prayers involved? Eitherway, his spiritual discipline paid off as that fieriness was put to good use as he challenged and corrected the churches that had begun to grow up in Corinth, Galatia and other areas. These churches had a tendency to fall into laziness and comfort, perpetuating division among themselves, despite their apparent healthy numbers. Paul from the outset takes to heart Christ's words that 'A divided house cannot stand' and sets out to offer them proper leadership.<sup>6</sup> Faith in Christ requires a complete change of life.

So Paul takes what he finds and moulds them through strong direction and into a community dedicated to prayer and service in the name of Jesus Christ. They don't always understand and it seems they have a remarkable propensity for misinterpreting what Paul is trying to teach them. The communities rarely seem to get along; when they don't have issues with each other, they seem to have issues with him. But that does not stop him from continuing to challenge them when they fall into error.

He especially shows frustration with members who refuse to openly confess Jesus Christ, with those who gossip maliciously, those who try to trip people up by false witness... We have all be subjected to these things from time to time, and Paul is astute enough to recognise that such behaviour is the most destructive and divisive for any Church community. Nothing would destroy it quicker – nothing would betray Christ more. The same kind of behaviour from Judas and the authorities had led Christ to the cross, and so, in his mind, engaging in such behaviour went against everything the Church stood for.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:23

<sup>3</sup> John 21:15-17

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>5</sup> Acts 8:1

<sup>6</sup> Mk. 3:25

Intertwined with all of this, he offers brilliant insight into the nature of love and Christian character. It is he who gives us those beautiful lines in 1 Corinthians 13: 'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not deceitful or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the Truth (of God)...'<sup>7</sup> He also teaches much about reconciliation and forgiveness – which should be limitless.

His aim is to promote unity and order so that the Church may grow as one body; united, supportive, loyal to each other for one purpose, Jesus Christ our Lord. In the end, Paul tries to offer a firm message of togetherness and he is willing to endure massive sufferings in order to achieve it.

Christ never said that we would not be troubled; we would not be tempted; we would not make mistakes; we would not be betrayed by those close to us; we would not feel challenged by His gospel; but he did say that so long as we were faithful and loyal to him and his Church we would not be overcome.

All these things are true in the lives of Peter and Paul – Both were the betrayer (one denying Jesus three times, the other persecuting his church), and yet both ended up being betrayed numerous times themselves because of their ministry. Both encountered huge troubles and temptations. Both certainly made mistakes. But their faithfulness to Christ and their loyalty to his Church and people meant that they were never overcome. In the end, their faith was all they had, and it saved them from a life of fear and bitterness.

Just like our villages and buildings, over the centuries the experience and example of great leaders like Peter and Paul have been the foundation that the Church has grown, flexed and adapted upon. Today, we are called to no less commitment, graciousness, resilience and loyalty in the faith: those same pillars remain eternal. They are the things on which heaven is built, because it is a realm built on love and unity. And in the end, only the Kingdom of God will stand.

These two men had their hearts changed by encounter with the Lord God, walking in peace and teaching the Kingdom. The Church is not built on stones or bricks, but on the change of heart which comes with the love of God and the need to build the kingdom, hearts aflame with the fire of the Holy Spirit. These two men founded the Church and Almighty God, through them, gives us the power to forgive, bind and unite, more than we know and in ways we do not understand. This is how, in a complex and hectic world, juggling many things as a part of daily life, we can rest in the perfect balance of God's love.

To the only God; Immortal, Invisible; be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever. Amen.

*R.T. Parker-McGee 2015*

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-7