

Sunday 30th June 2024
St Peter and St Paul

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 12:1-11
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18
Gp: Mark 5:21-end

Today feels a bit like low Sunday- the week after Easter. Last Sunday we had the huge celebration of Fr Crispin's final service and how glorious that was! Today may seem a bit ordinary, but we are in fact celebrating the festival of St Peter and St Paul. Petertide, as this time in the church's calendar is known, has become for me a time of reflecting upon my blessings, of knowing God's faithfulness and being grateful for God's faith in me. I was ordained Deacon three years ago and ever since, throughout my curacy here at Liverpool Parish Church and more latterly, becoming Assistant Priest has been filled with joy and blessings.

Today we learn a bit more about St Peter and St Paul. At first glance the Fisherman and the Pharisee, do not have much in common. Each made their respective mark on the early church and the impact of their active faith is handed down to us today. They are remembered together because it is regarded as the anniversary of their martyrdom in about the year 64. When we read the letters of Paul we are never quite sure what questions or behaviours he is responding to. We need some insight into the world in which he lived; particularly the place of women in ancient society. As a well-educated Greek and Roman citizen, he writes in the correct and formal style of his day. He is the classic "poacher turned gamekeeper". A zealous persecutor of followers of the way of Christ until his own encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. A deep thinker from whom we have received so much; whose thoughts on the nature of God and what it means to live the Christian life have become a part of our Christian DNA.

Paul suffered much, as did Peter, and he gave us much. Whatever you think about Paul, the translations of his letters have given us some of the most profound passages in the Bible. Whatever the issues he addresses in his writings, he is clear about one thing; God loves us, each of us, deeply, endlessly and freely. To quote from that famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, "*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 irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*". Michelle and I will be hearing this passage a lot as it is a favourite for wedding couples. This is the love of God that St Paul wrote about and which we are called to reflect.

St Peter knew that God loved him. He experienced this daily as he lived with and followed Jesus; he saw it in the healing miracles, the compassion for those in need, and the forgiveness and understanding that he himself received. Unlike Paul, Peter possibly had no formal education, yet Jesus called him. There are many stories of Peter in the gospels; Peter getting out of the boat and walking on the water as he saw Jesus do and then realising what he is doing, sinking as he looks at his feet instead of Jesus. Peter not understanding the significance of going up the mountain with Jesus and seeing him transfigured and seeing Moses and Elijah and wanting to build them shelters. Peter denying that he knows Jesus after his arrest but still feeling that he needs to follow his friend and teacher. Peter at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning. Peter hiding with the other disciples. And later in

Acts, Peter filled with the holy spirit bringing others to faith in the living God and leading the early church.

Our reading today of Peter being delivered from a prison where he was almost certainly to be put to death for his faith. In the years that he walks alongside Jesus, Peter comes to a deep realisation of who Jesus is "*The Messiah, the son of the living God*" and for this profession of the truth Peter, Simon Peter becomes the one called Cephas, the Rock, the secure foundation on which the church is built. Peter gets it wrong, he doesn't understand, he hides, he lies, he acts on impulse, but God chooses this flawed and impetuous individual to be the founder of the church. Peter is you and Peter is me, a very real and imperfect human being.

Peter and Paul each in their way inspired others and continue to inspire others to build the church. What they knew and what God asks is that the church is a community built upon the sure foundation of the love of God as revealed in his son Jesus. Whatever else the church is, it must first and foremost be a community of love where we each recognise our own failings and love others for theirs, and we do this because God first loves us. We, each one of us, are the rocks on which the church is built. However beautiful a church building is unless it houses a community, a family where each is known and loved, it might as well be empty.

Moving on to our Gospel passage for today, we hear about the healing of Jairus's daughter and the woman who touched Jesus' cloak. This passage in Mark's Gospel reminds us of God's incarnational response to the suffering of humanity. Through the ministry of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, we are provided with an example of salvation, redemption and liberation. It is quite overwhelming to think about the purpose and mission of Jesus was to recover the personhood of those who have been lost or marginalised by human conditions, systems and structures. There is hope in the image of a suffering God, the theme of a redemptive Jesus provides occasions to find God in seemingly unredeemable places. Even in that place of marginality, the woman who was haemorrhaging was brought to a place of healing and wholeness.

Like the woman who touched Jesus' cloak, many people in our communities are set aside for all sorts of reasons- for their ability, gender, sexuality, race, religion- the list goes on. Are we silent or complicit in their difficult situations? In this society where oppression and inequality are prevalent- what do we do to stand against this? As followers of Jesus do we step out and offer renewal, restoration and redemption through the touch of Jesus' cloak?

We are reminded over and over that our churches and our communities can be re-imagined through God's generous love. We are called to a God-centred model of humanity living together in a way that is beyond boundaries and brings into God's kingdom those who society has rejected. However, that doesn't always happen and there are members of the LGBTQI+ community that feel excluded from this Kingdom, where couples of the same sex still cannot be married in church. At Liverpool Parish Church we held a vigil service with Bishop John last Sunday evening. This was a service to provide a voice to those very people feeling marginalised by the church just because of who they love. Hopefully, Bishop John can have some influence and maybe things can progress, but it takes more than Bishop John. It takes all of us standing up and showing love and providing a warm welcome to everyone.

To be honest, I know here at Liverpool Parish Church, we do offer an inclusive welcome, so maybe I am preaching to the converted. We are all made in the image of God and any institutional system or structure undermining the full participation and contribution of any person erodes kingdom community.

As a church community we have a role to play in offering a Jesus centred approach of solidarity with people from all backgrounds and all walks of life, particularly those who live on the outside. The relationships Jesus had with people demonstrated unconditional love and acceptance. The truth of the Gospel is that God is found in vulnerability. His presence is revealed, and people encounter Jesus when we take up the invitation to create communities where all people know a God-centred acceptance and belonging in his kingdom family.

The challenge then is for us to open ourselves to a more extensive compassion for people who might be different from us. It should matter to us when others are bleeding, crying and dying because we are called to be a welcoming and inclusive church.

Mthr Jennifer Brady