

Feast of St Peter & St Paul

Brookton and Edward's Crossing, 9th July, 2023

This afternoon as we (will) gather in a church dedicated to St Paul, we (will) recall that not far north of (t)here at Gilgering there is a church building dedicated to St Peter and that the daughter churches north of York at Wilberforce and Tipperary had been dedicated to St Peter and St Paul respectively. In deciding to dedicate their churches to St Peter and St Paul the people of the Avon Valley were replicating the dedication of some very significant churches throughout the world; even in our own nation, where the Anglican cathedrals of Adelaide and Melbourne are dedicated similarly – St Peter in Adelaide and St Paul in Melbourne. Of course, probably the most famous of all churches, that of the see of Rome is dedicated to St Peter, while the great cathedral church of London and the British Empire is dedicated to St Paul. Perhaps less well known is that Westminster Abbey's dedication is really the Collegiate Church of St Peter at Westminster.

You may have wondered, given how important each of these two apostles is in the life of the Christian faith and Church, as to why their most significant celebration in the liturgical calendar of the Church is one in which they are celebrated together. The Conversion of St Paul and the Confession of St Peter are what we call Lesser Festivals. One suggestion might be that it allows the highest recognition to two of the greatest, if not greatest, apostles of the Church whose journeys to knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ were very different; as were their backgrounds!

Peter came from Bethsaida in Galilee, son of Jonas and brother of Andrew, another disciple called by Jesus to follow him. Named Simon, he was a fisherman by trade, unlearned and poor. Having been called to discipleship by Jesus and later renamed Peter (Cephas) by Jesus himself he remained a zealous disciple of Jesus from the beginning of his salvation until and beyond Jesus' Passion. Paul was also a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin who came from Tarsus in what is today south-central Turkey. He was a Roman citizen, a Pharisee, born of a Pharisee, and a disciple of the great Pharisee and teacher from Jerusalem, Gamaliel. St Paul, known from birth as Saul, was a fervent zealot for the traditions of Judaism so much so

that he was a persecutor of the followers of Jesus' "People of the way" as they were known. As an expression of this rage and fury against these followers of Jesus, and their growing influence, he was on his way to Damascus to cleanse that city of such disciples when he had a miraculous encounter with Jesus. This encounter was to transform his life beyond expectation; in fact, ultimately to transform the world forever!

St Paul's conversion was to be extraordinary in the way by which it affected the depth and breadth of his travels, writing, and the persecution of him, as he set out to proclaim and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While St Peter is more readily associated with the ongoing life of the Lord's disciples in Jerusalem, it is, in part, their ministry at the same time as each other in Rome, the great centre of the Empire, that leads to them being celebrated together.

Both of them were martyred in Rome, Peter in 64 AD, during the reign of Emperor Nero, where at the Circus of Nero (a large open venue for public events) and not being a Roman Citizen, he was crucified and according to tradition crucified upside down for he did not consider himself worthy to die in the same way as Jesus. He was buried in the Vatican Necropolis near to the Circus, but outside the City Wall, and where the Emperor Constantine upon conversion to Christianity, built a church in the Saint's honour above the grave – St Peter's Basilica in what is today Vatican City.

Paul was martyred at a similar time, sometime between 64 and 68 AD and while not crucified on the same day or necessarily the same year, Paul, being a Roman Citizen, was beheaded and buried also outside the city wall.

While there might be much in the co-incidence that they were both martyred in Rome, are known as the Patron Saints of Rome, and that they both contributed to the foundation and growth of our Faith as writers of books in the New Testament, and whose witness and ministry is recorded in other works of the New Testament, it is worthy of our consideration as we reflect upon our own lives, witness and ministry, is that both of them, great and influential as they were and became, were not without flaw. You will recall the rather embarrassing incident

whereby St Peter at the time of Jesus' Passion denies that he knows Jesus three times, and Saul's blood curdling efforts against believers, not least watching on with approval as St Stephen, the first Christian martyr is stoned to death. Yet, these men were to know and experience redemption at the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then to be called to their very significant Christian ministries – St Peter, as our Gospel account reminds us today, when beside the Sea of Galilee Jesus somewhat annoyingly I suspect asks St Peter three times if he loves him and receiving affirmative answers, telling St Peter to feed his sheep! St Paul's redemption is played out in that most remarkable story of the "blinding light" on the road to Damascus and its completion in Damascus at the hands of Ananias.

These stories should not only be of historical interest, but they ought be of great consolation and inspiration to us for as unworthy and unimportant Christians as ourselves we are called also to be missionaries and apostles for the Gospel. As with our reading from the Acts of the Apostles let us be open to the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us and in our lives, so that when we speak people of all stations and places in life's journey might hear expressed the Good News of Jesus Christ – let us be ambassadors speaking of God's deeds of power. As with the exhortation of St Paul in his Second Letter to St Timothy might we be filled with confidence in our proclamation that the Lord will stand by the faithful, so that they might fight the good fight, finish the race, having kept the Faith and thus been saved for the Heavenly Kingdom.

While the Gospel passage recounts Jesus' redemptive interaction with St Peter so to follow Jesus and feed his sheep, we do well to heed the advice in the final verses when Jesus reminds St Peter and by association ourselves, of the truth that we are to keep true to the vocation to which we have been called, not concerning ourselves with comparisons with others. We are as always, at Jesus command and direction to "Follow Him"; surely this is our privilege and joy, and in times when worldly culture and behaviour is defined by the values and behaviour of Robodebt and PwC, it is a necessity.