

St Peter and St Paul 2020. "I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith."

The stories of St Peter and St Paul give us encouragement. They became great champions of the faith, they are amongst those we look up to, they laid the apostolic foundation upon which the Church is built, and we owe them a lot. But they (in common with all the saints, and all the men and women of faith who have gone before) would divert attention away from themselves in all that was achieved in their lives, and own before the Church and the world that they could have done nothing without God, and that in all their triumphs the glory belongs to him, and him alone. *Non nobis domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam.*

Neither, when we first encounter him in the NT narratives, conducts himself in what we might consider a saintly way, but each of their stories give us hope for our own lives, and for what God might do through us.

Paul was originally known (of course) as Saul. Undoubtedly, he was a passionate man and driven by conviction. He was a Pharisee and zealous in persecuting the early Christians. He approved of the stoning of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr. St Luke tells us in Acts, that those involved in the stoning laid their coats at Saul's feet. That horrible incident in which Stephen died, marked the beginning of the persecution of the early Church. The disciples scattered, but as they fled, the disciples continued to spread the word about the Way of Christ.

Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of the Way, when he had a dramatic change of heart. It is not surprising that the longer established disciples found it difficult to meet and face Paul. This was a man with blood on his hands, the blood of their fellow followers of the Way. He needed Barnabas as a mediator to negotiate an entrance. They must have been fearful and wondered if he had really changed. Was it a trick? Was it a plot to trap them? It must have been difficult to understand God's plan. Paul's conversion is a witness to the forgiveness and transforming power of God. (Our hope for our own lives is that God still has power to forgive and transform.)

Paul's dynamism led him to make three missionary journeys outside the Jewish world. Paul became the apostle of the Gentiles. His letters, which comprise the bulk of the NT, reveal his friendship and support for his fellow Christians as well as giving keen insight into the implications of the resurrection of Christ for human living. Paul was finally taken prisoner and brought to Rome. He lived under house arrest until he was executed on the orders of the Emperor Nero. At the end of his life, Paul looked back with gratitude and recognised that his power came from God and that God had been faithful. He knew that death would not conquer because of the power of Christ's resurrection.

Peter, too, began with another name, Simon. He, too, died the martyr's death in Rome, and as the story goes, preferred to be crucified upsidedown, because he considered himself unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his saviour. His story has something of an inauspicious start, too. Despite the healing of his mother-in-law (yes the first Pope was married!), his being there at the Transfiguration, and at so many moments in Jesus' ministry which perhaps from our perspective we think should have left him in no doubt whatsoever, and despite the protestation that he would be prepared to die for his Lord, at the first challenge he denies even knowing Jesus and repeats the denial twice before the cockcrow. Peter's life, like Paul's, is a witness to the forgiveness and transforming power of God. Peter means 'Rock', and this wavering disciple becomes the rock upon which the Church is built. He became leader of the Church in Rome, you might say its first bishop, its first pope. (Again our hope for our own lives is that God still has power to forgive and transform.)

We can draw inspiration from both these saints, who knew they were utterly dependent upon the grace of God, who were passionate about Christ. We can also draw inspiration from the people who have passed on the faith to us. As we give thanks today for Sts Peter and Paul and all the saints and martyrs of history, let's also give thanks for the commitment of our teachers and priests and those who directly fostered our faith, and resolve afresh to be faithful each of us to our own calling. We may not all be called to be apostles or martyrs, to be a Peter or a Paul, we may not all be called to ordination, but each and every baptised Christian is called to their own particular work and ministry. As we exercise our ministries with renewed commitment we perhaps will all prove to be not Pauls or Peters, but more of us might be Barnabases. Barnabas was Paul's companion and his name means "Son of Encouragement."

May we, by God's grace, prove to be an encouragement to one another as we continue the ministry and mission of the Church where & when God has placed us.