

This weekend is often called in the church 'Petertide'. It's the season for ordinations. In the past 36 hours I have been to three ordinations. This is a bit of a record for me, but it has given me an amazing opportunity to ponder and reflect about what it means for each of us to say that we are called by God.

Yesterday Bishop Sarah referred to this call being like the keys to the kingdom which Peter is given in our gospel reading today – keys that are a gift which should open up the love of God to all, not keys of a gatekeeper that keeps others out. She reflected that this task is one that all believers share in – the call to open up faith to others.

While some, like those ordained yesterday, have been called or set aside for a specific role in the church; the reality is that we are all called by God to fulfil a purpose, and to use the gifts that we have been given for the good of all creation.

The name Petertide comes from the Feast day for the churches first leaders of Peter and Paul which falls on the 29th June each year.

The personal backgrounds and individual lives of these two men were very different. Peter, a fisherman from the same region as Jesus, who received his special name (Peter), meaning 'Rock', from Jesus himself, was one of his first chosen disciples and was named as leader of the twelve apostles.

Paul, a Pharisee and citizen of Rome, never met Jesus during his time on earth. He only met Jesus after he had risen. This took place on the road to Damascus, an event which changed Saul of Tarsus into Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. What joined them was their love of Jesus and their martyred-death in the city of Rome, Peter by crucifixion and Paul, as a Roman citizen, by beheading with the sword.

Both Peter and Paul are key leaders in the early church and their witness has influenced the lives and faith of millions throughout all generations. That is why it is traditional at this time of the year – as close to the 29th as possible – for the Church to ordain Priests and Deacons – those whom the church calls to be leaders. It is also a time of the year when we are all asked to consider our own vocations – the tasks in daily life which God has called us to. For each person has a part to play in the life of a community. The example of Peter and Paul invite each of us to consider afresh who God has called us to be. So why have these two martyrs become so important in the life of the church?

For me, one of the things which these saints offer is their humanness. Both these men record the struggles which they faced by living an earthly life and the temptations they faced in living out their faith in Jesus Christ. Both at times let God down – and yet – they both having guided so many to faith, in the end died for their beliefs. Peter and Paul both offer leadership in the early church, in spite of their own weaknesses. They remind us that God

does not call us to be perfect – just faithful, and like these two great men – at times the journey may not be as straight forward as we would like!

The prophecy we hear from Zechariah gives a clue to this humanness. Zechariah reminds us of the kind of God we follow – not by might, nor by power but by spirit – says God. This is such an important theme in our faith that it is stated in the ordination service of Priests. "*You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God*¹". This is not just a statement to Priests – but to all Christians as we seek to follow the word of God. Peter and Paul knew this probably more than anyone else – because despite our power, or wisdom, or knowledge, or wealth – in the end it is the spirit of God that sustains us – it is God's spirit alone.

I don't know about you, but I find this quite challenging. I like to be in control of my life and know where things are going. I like structure and lists! But I don't like them all the time. I like structure to give me the boundaries – and then I can move with the flow more easily. While I will rarely admit, I suspect this is something I have in common with both Peter and Paul. I like to know the rules before I step out into the unknown. But what we also learn from these two great saints is that this is not always possible – but what is possible is that we can be certain of, and confident in, the presence of God in all that we are asked to do! The readings today remind us of how it might work.

Peter is so often addressed in the Gospels as 'one of little faith'. And yet here today we hear Peter affirmed for his strength of faith. At the heart of this story is the power of faith. Particularly in Matthew's gospel faith is seen as the contrast to those who challenge Jesus teaching. In Matthew's Gospel this is the first time that word 'Messiah' is used, he also the only writer to use the term 'church'². Church as the community of disciples and the kingdom of God are intimately bound in Matthew's conception of Jesus' mission, which from this point on in the story is linked to Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

So here we have Peter, claiming Jesus as Messiah and recorded as the corner stone of 'the church', and yet even in these strong and powerful statements we get a taste of the Peter who does not rest in this power but relies upon the grace of God. The keys of God's kingdom are not handed over lightly, and while they are keys that give access to eternity, they are also keys which bring the responsibility of such trust.

The account of the interaction between Peter and Jesus spells out who Jesus is, his desire for a community of faith to grow around them, and

¹ Common Worship Ordination Service

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=981

recognition that within this community the one thing they can be confident in is – the Kingdom of God. There will be challenges – things which need to be ‘bound on earth and in heaven’ – and the conversation is phrased strongly enough so that both the reader and Peter know that there will be difficult and confronting times ahead.

We don’t hear an account of Paul today in our readings, but over the last few weeks we have heard much of his voice in his writing to the Corinthians. Paul is clear and articulate – a well-educated person. But this doesn’t stop him questioning himself at different times in the epistles either.

So what do these great Saints, what does God ask of us?

For the last five years or so we have been living out the London Diocese mission statement – to be confident, compassionate and creative – as we live out our lives of faith.

Confident like Peter and Paul about our lives of faith!

Compassionate like Peter and Paul in the way we care for others.

Creative like Peter and Paul as we respond to the needs of this community.

Our mission statement as a parish is built on these foundations.

I think they are good examples of us living this out.

In our two minute slot and over coffee I often hear people talking more confidently about their faith; and I think we are also more confident of the questions that our faith raises for us.

We express our compassion in so many ways I think it is hard to measure them; from week to week we as parish and as individuals feed the homeless, support vulnerable adults, provide safe spaces to meditate and learn, nurture children and young people and their families. We visit the sick, sit with those who mourn. This parish has a real gift for the generous ways in which it shows compassion to others. I do think however we still are learning how to show compassion to ourselves.

We are also really creative in the way that we respond to others. We provided spaces for others to be creative as well.

While we still have much to learn and do, I think we should celebrate all that we have also achieved as we have sought to live out God’s call on our lives. In two weeks when we celebrate St Anne’s Day I hope we have a chance to do this creatively and well.

As the people of God in this place – let us be confident in our faith and express this through the power of God’s spirit working with us, working through us and working in us. And let us also remember that we *cannot*

Feast of Peter and Paul – 30th June 2019
Zechariah 4: 1-6a, 10b-end; Acts 12: 1-11 and Matthew 16: 13-19

bear the weight of this calling in our own strength, but only by the grace and power of God³". Amen.

³ Common Worship Ordination Service