

Saints Peter and Paul
St. Matthew 16:13-19
January 26th, 2020
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Very Human Examples

Peter, Paul and Mary... was a popular folk singing group from the 1960's that wrote such songs as "Blow'in in the Wind," "The Wedding Song," "Puff the Magic Dragon," "Leaving on a Jet Plane," and "If I had a hammer." As I name the songs, I can hear them in my head.

Peter, Paul and Mary are much more than just a folk group. These are also the names of the three most influential people in the early Church. Likely without their work and sacrifice, things would look very different today. And today we remember the first two individuals in that group of Christian founders.

Peter and Paul are the rocks on whom our Church, our faith is built. They are giants. Yet they are also very human.

Peter was originally known as Simon. Jesus gave him the name Petrus, or "the rock." Jesus called Peter His rock, and on that rock the Church would be built. The gates of hell would not prevail against this Church and whatever Peter bound on earth would be bound with God in heaven and what ever he let go on earth would be let go in heaven. Powerful words. Peter was the wise leader who mustered the Apostles and sent them out to spread the Gospel from Jerusalem. Peter would end up being crucified like Jesus, only in his humility, he asked to be crucified upside down as he felt unworthy to have his death mimic his master's.

Paul, whose earlier name was "Saul," was an opponent of the early Christians. He upheld the teachings of Judaism and was a devout Pharisee. Members of his family, likely his nephews were converts to Christianity before he was. He says himself that he sought to persecute the early Christians. In fact, in the story of his conversion by Luke in Acts, states that after he saw a great light and fell to the ground on the road to Damascus, he heard a voice in Hebrew say to him, "Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?" When Paul asked who was speaking to him, the voice answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Paul would go on to become the most fruitful Apostle of the whole lot. He brought Christianity to the provinces of the Mediterranean and to Rome itself.

But it is also important to remember that both of the men betrayed Jesus. Peter said he would never do so in disbelief at the suggestion the last supper, when Jesus said: "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "This very night, before the rooster crows, you will

disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." [Luke 22:33-34]

And yet, we know that only a few hours later after uttering those words, he denied Jesus three times, exactly as Jesus predicted, and then the rooster crowed. Those words must have burned in his mouth as he spoke them. Peter ran off with the other disciples and hid in a house for fear that the authorities might come for them also, and that is where Easter morning found them, shaking, wondering what would come next.

Saul gathered up coats as people assembled to stone to death Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He chased Christians into the synagogues, trying to get them to make blasphemous statements in his opinion, so that he could drag them off to judgment. He was on his way on the road to Damascus to chase more Christians when Jesus appeared to him in a great light and Saul was converted and became Paul, whose writings make up the balance of the New Testament and who spread Christianity throughout the known world, transforming it from a mere cult in the Jewish tradition in Israel to what would become the dominant faith of Western Civilization. No small task.

What strikes me is how God used very flawed and very human people to lead his Church. Peter was an uneducated fisherman. As Simon, his existence would have been lost in the dust of the ages. Now one of the greatest cathedrals in Christendom bears his name. [St. Peter's Rome] Saul was a dedicated Pharisee whose beliefs lead him to be angry with those whom he perceived were challenging his faith. Now a great Cathedral rises to his name in London. [St. Paul's, London] Both men betrayed Jesus by their actions. Yet Jesus forgave their faults, and used them to strengthen their ministry in His name. For Peter, his betrayal was humbling and faith-building. He knew the power and truth of who Jesus is first hand. His betrayal was never forgotten in his mind, and he worked his whole life overcoming those three denials by affirming his faith and affirming his Lord whom he was privileged to meet and to serve. He faced down death and imprisonment. Saul used his betrayal as a sign of the truth of his message. He who was against Christians, who persecuted them, had found the truth in Jesus and the truth set him free from the shackles of his past and set him on fire to dedicate his whole life to spreading the Gospel. His words in his letters reveal the character of this man and how his faith changed him. He no longer sought to persecute others, least of all the Jewish people from whom he came.

Have we not all betrayed Jesus by our thoughts or our actions at some point in our lives? Are we not human also? While we would like to think of ourselves as better than that, as Peter did while sitting at the table of the Last Supper, we are very human. We will betray our faith and our promises. Yet it gives me hope to witness what God did with Simon and Saul, who were frail human beings like me. I know have betrayed Jesus in my own life, denying him in word and deed. When I say 'Lord I am not worthy' before I receive communion, I mean it.

The message of hope today is that our lives do not have to remain shattered by our very human betrayals, both great and small. We can move beyond them. The stone of our

fall that becomes a great weight crushing us can become the cornerstone of a new life in Christ.

This walk begins in humility, if you can muster it, knowing who you are and whose you are. You belong to God. You have Christ's seal stamped on your forehead. (That is the sign of the cross sealed in our Baptism and made with Holy Chrism blessed by the bishop to link us all together-people of one faith in Christ.)

God will give you the strength by God's love and forgiveness to lift the heavy weight of the rock that is crushing you, off your mind and off your chest, so that you will not perish under the weight of it, (as you might fear as I have and so many others have.) And then comes the work of embracing that rock, accepting what you have done and accepting that you are not uniquely a sinner, as even the great Simon and Saul join you in that club. Most everyone you know is a member also.

And on embracing that rock which you wish to reject and cast off, God invites you and me to discover and understand how you can use it to rebuild your new life and the ministry to which we are called.

Didn't someone say, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone?' [Psalm 118:22]

Our conscience can give us both the insight to identify the geology of the rock which crushes us as well as the means and strength to lift it off. And the conscience to motivate us that we possess is from God. God gives each of us the strength to do it. Witness the examples of Simon and Saul. Today we celebrate that witness and embrace it for our own lives and the gravel and rocks under which we struggle. AMEN