

## Reflection for 29<sup>th</sup> June: the feast of Saints Peter and Paul

When all is said and done, we are a pretty odd bunch of people. And it's not just here – our entire planet is inhabited by a diverse group of nations, beliefs, genders, and all the rest of it. It's often very difficult to determine how someone will react unless we know them well – and even then it's a bit hit and miss. Even people in the same occupation or from the same family, are different and we all react differently to the same stimulus. Conversely, people from radically different backgrounds can react similarly to the same stimulus. Two prime examples of this can be found in the two saints whose memory we celebrate today, Peter and Paul; as different as Yorkshire Pudding and Shrimps on the barbie and yet both reacted similarly to the challenge of Christ.

Compare the two: Peter was one of Jesus' closest friends during his time on earth. Paul, as far as we know, never met Jesus or heard him preach, and wasn't converted to Christianity until after Jesus' Resurrection. Peter was a fisherman (like his father before him) whereas Paul was a learned man, a Pharisee - like his father before him. Peter was a native of the fishing town of Bethsaida . Conversely Paul was a Roman citizen, born in the university city of Tarsus. And yet, these two men in their different ways have had a most significant impact in the shaping of the church as we know it today.

Whereas Peter was a staunch advocate for tradition, Paul was not a great stickler for justification by rules. He was more concerned with what a person believes than their religious observances; faith itself being sufficient qualification for justification before God. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul says "I have kept the faith". He doesn't mean that he has adhered to the rules, but rather he's stating "I have kept to the contract" as one would in a business sense. Paul is saying, therefore, that he has fulfilled God's calling in full, he has carried out the work that he has been set to the letter.

Can we honestly say that we have carried out God's work to the letter? Jesus himself set us many tasks: proclaiming his name to the nations; loving your neighbour as yourself and so on. Can we honestly say that we have fulfilled all of these?

Now it's natural to think of Peter and Paul as friends - after all, they share a festal day and are often pictured in stained glass together. However, though we cannot be 100% certain that they actually met, theirs was a strained relationship. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that Paul went to Jerusalem to persuade the church leaders that non-Jews who became Christians didn't have to become Jews first - nor should they be bound by *any* of the Old Testament Laws. The argument seems to have been somewhat heated and they ended up agreeing that only four laws were binding (though we're not actually told which four). Peter was not happy with any of this at all and the two had a blazing row about it - nowadays they'd have had a flame war on Facebook.

The nub of the problem was the fact that there were (at least) two factions in the early church – the traditionalists, under James, of whom Peter was one, who (according to their opponents) insisted that the important thing about Christians was that they followed strict rules of behaviour. And then there were the others, under Paul, who were accused of teaching that people of any race who are inspired by the Holy Spirit can apply the commandment to love our neighbour in any way which is suitable to the society in which they live.

It is not too dissimilar to the problems the Church has faced throughout the centuries and

still faces today. Look in popular media today. We see factions, one declaring the rules as they interpret them as being inviolable and the others who harken back to Jesus' two great commandments to love God and love your neighbour, and who therefore take a more liberal view. So whether it's same sex marriage, the role of women in the episcopacy, remarriage after divorce, the giving of tithes, eating pork or whatever, throughout the centuries battle lines have been drawn, some finding Bible quotes to back up their argument and others querying their direct relevance in a society very far removed from that to whom they were originally written and instead appealing to the loving nature of God who created us all equal. The arguments can become heated and cause damage to both sides. We try to convince the other side that we are right and exacerbate the problem instead of agreeing to disagree.

Disagreement is not necessarily a cop out. Nor is it a bad thing. Peter and Paul recognised that, in spite of their disagreements, that it was more important to preserve the unity of the Church since it is Christ's body militant here on earth. When we find people of differing opinions, thoughts and rigidly held beliefs, we need to work together in order to find reconciliation. Peter and Paul show us that there is room for many different opinions in Christ's family of love. If we remember that, the oil of anointing will be poured equally on each of us.