FEAST OF THE APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

On Tuesday last week we celebrated the Feast of the Nativity of the Holy, Glorious Prophet Forerunner and Baptist John and in the service, which we sadly did not celebrate, we read the remarkable account of his birth to Zechariah, High Priest for the year, and his wife, Elizabeth when they were “getting on in years” to quote the text. Elizabeth rejoiced according to the account in Luke’s gospel because of “what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people”. Sterility for a woman was a source of great shame in those times, as it still is in parts of the world today, when the inability to procreate is often blamed on the woman even when the source of the problem lies on examination with the male. The readings from the Old Testament in the Vespers service recall the Patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah having similar problems because the ability to have children and large families was considered a sign of God’s blessing. We can imagine the depth of inferiority that she endured from other women especially from her servant Hagar who had already given birth to a son Ishmael by her husband. The news announced by the archangel Gabriel to Zechariah in Luke chapter 1 comes also with an unimaginable blessing from God. “You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great in the sight of the Lord ……with the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before Him” i.e. Christ. When he is born he goes into the wilderness until the day he appears publicly to Israel announcing the coming of the Messiah as promised, and calling on all to repent and receive baptism in the waters of Jordan as a sign of this inner change. We are told that his fame reached the ears of Herod the King who would gladly hear him even though John denounced him for his adultery and other evil acts. His life ended suddenly when he was called from his prison cell and beheaded to satisfy Herodias his brother’s wife whom he had taken as his own, who hated John. His role as forerunner, the light before the gospel is summed up by the Lord, “He who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he”.

Today, however, we turn our attention to the leaders of the apostles Peter and Paul and one of the first things we notice is how different they are as people, as Fr Ian mentioned last week that holy men and women, saints, come in many shapes and forms and ethnicities. In this case, Peter is a humble fisherman, a relatively uneducated person who confesses in his second letter to one of his communities that he finds “some things in Paul’s teaching difficult to understand”. As he accompanies Christ after his calling along with his brother Andrew he is overpowered by his miracles, “Who is this that the winds and sea obey him?” and is confronted by his own human weakness and lack of faith when he panics as he tries to walk towards Christ across the water. Later to his utter shame he denies that he ever knew Jesus at his arrest. But his assessment of Christ is spot on, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God”, which earns him his ordination to be the head of the Church and to hold the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven as we have just read. Despite his human weakness he is forgiven and despite his misunderstanding that Christ is not here to build an earthly kingdom but to offer his life as a ransom for many for the salvation of the world, he is chosen. Later when the embryonic Church, the Way, as it is called, meets practical difficulties over the inclusion of the Gentiles within its fold, a certain party within it of Jewish members insist on the necessity of circumcision for new Gentile members. Peter clearly leans towards this view and he is criticized and corrected by Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, for his tacit support of this group even though he has witnessed the Holy Spirit descending on Gentiles in his presence at Joppa. Rather shamefacedly he concedes to the greater knowledge and theological understanding of Paul whose position is that the new law of the Kingdom supersedes all these rituals of Jewish Law which Christ has fulfilled in his death on the Cross, a death which he Peter has been told by his master that he will emulate. “When you are old you will be lifted up to go where you do not wish to go.”

Turning to Paul we find a man with a great intellect and a zealot for the Jewish Law and the traditions of their fathers who tried to destroy the church of God through violent persecution as he freely admits in his letter to the churches of Galatia. He meets Christ in a dramatic way as he journeys towards Damascus to root out and destroy the adherents of the new faith which has been established there. Having retreated into Arabia for three years, he makes contact with the leading members of the Church, Peter and James, the Lord’s brother. Then

fourteen years later in Jerusalem an agreement is reached that Peter shall be recognized as the apostle to the circumcised and Paul to the uncircumcised, the Gentiles, since the Holy Spirit is clearly working in both areas, to the West as well as the East.

We do not have details of the deaths of either of the two leaders since the second book of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, ends at the arrival of Paul in Rome and we are told that he lived there at his own expense for two years and that he openly and unhindered preached the kingdom of God. Today is the commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul. The Church’s tradition teaches that they both died as martyrs in Rome during the persecution under Nero in 64 A.D. According to that tradition, Paul was granted the right of a Roman citizen to be beheaded by a sword, but Peter suffered the fate of his Lord, crucifixion, though with head downward. There are, however, other traditions in apocryphal works.

What is clear in both lives is the importance of their meeting with Christ, one while alive over a period of 3 years or so; the other after his death and resurrection. Both develop their diaconia or service to God in different ways but with the same dedication and endurance; St Peter perhaps more tentatively and through many failures though he has no illusions about who his master is. The other with a passion and devotion turns from hatred of Christ and his message to utter certainty and conviction which in the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles enables him to endure all manner of suffering for the sake of the Gospel as the Lord foretells to Ananias before he restores his sight in Damascus.

Whichever way God lays out our journey towards him in life we know we can expect times of joy and those of pain; we too are promised that by our Master. The purpose is to deepen our love for Christ. Throughout the last week we have been taken through St Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome and difficult though it may be in parts we are told that we are saved by our faith in Christ since he has fulfilled the Old Law through his voluntary death on the Cross. We believe as Abraham trusted God and this makes us too children of the promise. Our faith in the Lord Jesus is reckoned to us as righteousness which we cannot earn just accept.

May God constantly remind us of this unique relationship with Him to inspire us to acts of love for his creation and his creatures as lights in the darkness of this world, as Christ says we are.

*Oxford, 29th June 2025*

But this not the only event we celebrate this weekend. Today we recall all the saints of Britain, the new martyrs of Greece under the Turkish occupation during a period of five hundred years and the new martyrs and confessors of Bulgaria. On Thursday we celebrated the Protomartyr or first martyr of Britain, St Alban, who gave his name to the city in Hertfordshire and who is buried in the cathedral. Some years ago I went to celebrate the Liturgy on his feast day in the cathedral and during the procession from the small chapel to the shrine I could feel the saint’s presence with us as we celebrated his glorious death. If you are not familiar with the story of his life, do look him up on Wikipedia when you go home. He is a most inspiring saint who gave his life for a Christian priest who came to his house for refuge under the persecution of Diocletian. Many see him as the real patron saint of England.

St John in his gospel says that we show our love for God by keeping his commandments and if we do this He and the Father will come and make his home in us for such is his will. The text which we have just read about keeping the eye sound and the body full of light is pivotal to how we live our lives and especially to how He with the Father can come to dwell increasingly with us. The Kingdom of Heaven must come first in all our calculations and actions, firstly to enable us to see the will of God and secondly to enable it to be fulfilled more expediently. Christ’s words highlight two things as real dangers, which deflect us from our path: putting material things first and worry. Jesus says the second is the source of the first; worry about material things produces an over-emphasis on them, which in a subtle way draws us away from the will of God and our peace in Him. St Silouan of Mount Athos writes in a very arresting way that any feeling of worry shows that we have ceased to rest in the will of God. He reasons like this: when we are in the will of God because we are at home, we are even ready to endure all kinds of afflictions. When we receive some kind of affliction which we cannot deal with ourselves we naturally pray to God with all our hearts asking him to remove it. If he does not, then it is clear that he has sent it for our salvation and we should strive to accept it. This brings us closer into the will of God. How disarmingly clear the analysis is and how hard to put it into practice!

The saints of Great Britain, the New Martyrs of Greece and those of Bulgaria whom we commemorate today understood better than us the importance of standing before God and establishing above all the sense of being in God’s will. Otherwise they could not have found the strength and in many cases the joy to continue in their ascetic struggle and especially the martyrs who understood the great honour which was being bestowed on them, of being witnesses, the meaning of the word in Greek, to Christ’s sacrifice, by being called to offer their lives for Him. In the story of St Alban what impresses me is how quickly and totally he comprehends the mystery of the Cross and agrees to offer his life.

The vocation of red martyrdom is not one which many of us are called to receive in this part of the world, unlike in the Middle East as I said two weeks ago, but there are other notions of martyrdom in the Christian tradition. Red martyrdom signifies those who refuse to deny their testimony to Christ and are put to death (Tertullian calls their death ‘the Seed of the Church’ since their witness to Christ causes many to be converted) while the term "white martyrdom" was used by the Church Father [Jerome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome), "for those such as desert hermits who aspired to the condition of martyrdom through strict asceticism”. There is also another form called green martyrdom which is often applied to the sacrament of marriage. The tensions of marital relations, the pressures of family life and its conflicts are certainly borne witness to by many of us who are in this church today and among our own circles of friends. The Orthodox marriage service is utterly realistic about the suffering involved in the sacrament since as the couple makes the circle of the church three times the choir sings a hymn to the martyrs asking them to intercede with Christ for mercy. Together they hold on to the priest’s epitrachil symbolizing the Lord’s presence in their marriage and his ever-present help. That same martyrdom is promised to a priest and his family at their ordination.

In the Church tradition it is made clear that martyrdom is a universal vocation for Christians not one restricted to those who have the physical, mental and emotional strength to endure. It is assigned by Christ in a form and measure according to our own capacity to bear it. It comes with sorrow and pain as well as joy and its purpose is to bring us to salvation. ‘There is no joy without suffering’, is a favourite saying of St Seraphim of Sarov. And joy, the second of the spiritual gifts listed by St Paul, is the aim of our life in Christ as the martyrs testify. Many are recorded to have gone to their deaths with joy because they wished to share the suffering of others. They saw the incomprehensible and immeasurable love of God in Christ’s offering for the whole world and they wished to reflect it in giving their own lives for others.

As we commemorate the Saints of these holy islands, the New Martyrs of Greece under the Turkish yoke and those of Bulgaria let us not be distressed or distracted by the sufferings which they endured. Some years ago I used to teach the British Army Gurkha regiments, who are mainly devout Hindus or Buddhists. One member of the class, who was particularly bright and who seemed to be marginalized, confessed to me that this was because he was a Christian. When I asked him about this he responded to my surprise and without hesitation that it was a great honour to suffer for Jesus Christ. He had understood the secret of joy in Christ. So let us dwell on the joy that suffering for Christ inspired in those we remember today and brings to those of us who courageously accept and embrace what is sent us. May we too in our own way experience that joy of martyrdom.

 *Oxford 25th June 2023*