

Solemnity of Saints Peter & Paul June 29th

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The Lord built His Church on the foundation of the Apostles (Revelation 21:14). Today we celebrate two of the greatest of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. Peter, the Rock, was the chief of the Apostles, their leader and our first Pope. Peter was executed in the reign of Nero sometime between A.D. 64 & 67. There is no historical evidence for the tradition that he was crucified, either upright or upside down; but this is no reason to discount the tradition. His tomb was believed, since before the time of Constantine, to have been under what we now call the Vatican. In 1968 Pope Paul VI announced that the skeletal remains of St. Peter had been found beneath the high altar.

Paul, the Pharisee who was converted on his trip to Damascus was also executed in the reign of Nero, in A.D. 67 or 68. Possibly at the same time as St. Peter. The place of martyrdom in local Roman tradition is the site of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. Since he was a Roman citizen, the mode of execution according to the same tradition was decapitation.

1st Reading - Acts 12:1-11

For today's first reading we find ourselves in A.D. 45, some 15 years after Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection (and the beginning of the book of Acts). The point of this reading, a point made more than once in Acts, is to teach how futile are the attempts of even the powerful to stifle the preachers of God's word.

¹ About that time King Herod laid hands upon some members of the church to harm them.

This is the grandson of the Herod who had ordered the census which caused Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem. Known as Herod Agrippa I, he had spent some time as a political prisoner in the jails of Rome under Emperor Caligula. He was a prison companion of Claudius. When Claudius was made emperor in AD 41, he gave Herod control over the middle and southern thirds of Israel.

² He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword,

James. The son of Zebedee and Salome; an elder brother of John the apostle. He was one of the twelve. He was by trade a fisherman, in partnership with Peter. He was the first martyr among the apostles, having been beheaded by King Herod Agrippa in A.D. 44.

³ and when he saw that this was pleasing to the Jews he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (It was (the) feast of Unleavened Bread.)

Passover marked the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread which lasted for seven days. This

time mark has no bearing on the story except that Herod wanted to wait until the feast was concluded and the crowds had left town.

⁴ He had him taken into custody and put in prison under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each.

A very heavy guard.

He intended to bring him before the people after Passover. ⁵ Peter thus was being kept in prison, but prayer by the church was fervently being made to God on his behalf. ⁶ On the very night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter, secured by double chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while outside the door guards kept watch on the prison. ⁷ Suddenly the angel of the Lord stood by him and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and awakened him, saying, "Get up quickly." The chains fell from his wrists. ⁸ The angel said to him, "Put on your belt and your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Put on your cloak and follow me." ⁹ So he followed him out, not realizing that what was happening through the angel was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.

"Dream" might be a better translation.

¹⁰ They passed the first guard, then the second, and came to the iron gate leading out to the city, which opened for them by itself. They emerged and made their way down an alley, and suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹ Then Peter recovered his senses and said, "Now I know for certain that (the) Lord sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people had been expecting."

These are the people who had once welcomed the apostolic ministry but had now rejected it and stoned Stephen.

2nd Reading - 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18

Second Timothy is widely believed to be St. Paul's last letter, written from prison shortly before his death. For this reason it is regarded as his spiritual testament. What we hear today is his charge to Timothy and his closing personal remarks.

⁶ For I am already being poured out like a libation,

Paul expects to be put to death soon and regards the shedding of his blood as a libation (a sacrificial rite in which the liquid, generally wine or oil, was poured out). Paul knows that his martyrdom pays homage to God and is of value for the salvation of souls.

and the time of my departure is at hand.

Death is a departure from this life and a return to Christ.

⁷ I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.

Paul uses sports imagery to describe his pursuit of salvation. He has persevered and preserved and guarded the deposit of faith (as is the duty of any Bishop). Like one in a sporting event, he has not given up and is now approaching the finish line -- he has kept his eye on the goal.

⁸ From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me,

Like the winner of a sporting event who is awarded a laurel garland.

which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day,

The parousia, the day of judgement. God, like the emperor, bestows the award on the winners.

and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.

All who out of love for Christ have lived a Christian life as a preparation for His coming.

¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the proclamation might be completed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

Paul has endured house arrest and imprisonment in the past but has been released to continue his acts of evangelization.

And I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

A biblical image (Psalm 22:21; Daniel 6:19-22).

¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom.

Paul is not referring to release from his present imprisonment; he will be rescued for the heavenly kingdom.

To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 16:13-19

Today's reading takes place shortly after Jesus' bread of life discourse. This places it just a little less than a year before His passion, death, and resurrection.

¹³ When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi

A little over 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, near the headwaters of the Jordan River. The city was founded by Philip the tetrarch, brother of Herod Antipas; it was an entirely Gentile community. It was also the center of the cult of Pan.

he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

This is a suggestive messianic title which Jesus uses for himself (Daniel 7:13); it is never applied to Him by the disciples.

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist,

John had worked no wonders, but someone risen from the dead would be full of power.

others Elijah,

The prophet which Malachi 4:5 tells of coming before the day of the Lord. [see Sirach 48:10; Malachi 4:5 (Malachi 3:23 in New American Bible and New Jerusalem Bible)].

still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

The prophet who in his own experience of rejection and suffering announces the rejection and suffering of the Messiah.

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Jesus directly challenges the disciples.

¹⁶ Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter, the spokesman for the group, answers for all with a revelation that Jesus is the Messiah. Some call this "Peter's profession of faith"; more about this later. The Gospel of Matthew is alone in adding the title "the Son of the Living God" which directs attention to the Father-Son relationship and away from the military-nationalistic connotations of the title "Messiah."

¹⁷ Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you,

In Old Testament parlance, those who received God's blessing did wonderful things (Noah & Abraham for example).

Simon son of Jonah.

Some translations have "John" – not a genealogy so much as an indication that Simon is to follow in the footsteps of Jonah who preached repentance and brought about a great conversion.

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.

Note that this a revelation by God. God is using Simon as an instrument of divine revelation; it is not Simon's belief (or faith) which is being proclaimed, but God's revelation.

¹⁸ And so I say to you, you are Peter,

In Aramaic, *kepha* which has no gender. In Greek, *petros* which is masculine.

and upon this rock

In Aramaic, *kepha* which has no gender. In Greek, *petra*, which is feminine. The difference in genders between these two occurrences is not significant, except that it is not proper to address a male in the feminine form. Jesus and the disciples spoke Aramaic as is evidenced by several untranslated quotations in the New Testament. This is the first time in recorded history that a person is known as "rock".

I will build my church,

Only here and in Matthew 18:17 is the term *ekklesia* used. *Ekklesia* is a gathering of the faithful people; a common designation of the Christian community in the epistles. Jesus has changed Simon's name and has also given him a commission, which will be described in the next verse.

and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.

Not necessarily just a guarantee of freedom from influence by the powers of evil as is commonly interpreted, but also freedom from the power of death [*Sheol* (*Hades* in Greek) is the abode of the dead]. The office will not die with the occupant; it is to be a perpetual office, occupied in every generation by a successor.

¹⁹ I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Now we hear the description of Peter's commission. Compare to Isaiah 22:19-22 where God is replacing Shebna with Eliakim as the chief minister (prime minister) of the House of David (even though David has been dead for over 200 years, the office of prime minister over his house survives). The key is the symbol of his office, and the opening and shutting (binding and loosing) is his ability to determine the rules for entry to or exclusion from the house (kingdom of heaven). Notice that it is not Peter who does the binding and loosing, it is God. Peter only makes the earthly rules, God does the enforcing.