



The Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul 30th June 2024
Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“They drank the chalice of the Lord and became the friends of God” (Entrance Antiphon for the Feast)

This weekend we celebrate one of the most ancient Feasts of the Sanctoral Cycle coming even before Christmas itself. By the fourth century three Masses were celebrated on this day: one at St Peter’s, one at St Paul outside the walls, and one at St Sebastian’s Catacombs where the bodies of the Great Saints were probably kept hidden for a time.

Simon was a fisherman from Bethsaida; the brother of Andrew who introduced him to Jesus, but Simon would have been prepared by St John the Baptist for his encounter. Christ changed his name to Peter to focus on him being the foundation stone of the Church. Simon Peter was one of the first witnesses of the empty tomb and received a special apparition of the Risen Lord. Peter was the one who took on the proclamation of the Good News, and raised awareness that necessity of the Church being open to the pagans. It was Paul who challenged him to be free of his Hebrew practices, and when he came to Rome he became the Apostle for all, becoming the cornerstone of a Church inviting pagans and Jews into one body. Peter sealed this mission with his blood.

St Paul, after his conversion on the road to Damascus, travelled the Mediterranean in four or five great journeys. Starting his first journey, along with St Barnabas, from Antioch he ended up in Cyprus and then went on to travel across what today is Turkey. After the gathering of the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem Paul began a second journey; this time expressly sent by “the Twelve” through Turkey once more, becoming ill in Galatia. Then he travelled into Europe together with St Luke and founded the Church Community at Philippi in Macedonia, in present day Greece. After a time in prison, Paul proclaimed the Gospel in Greece: we recall his debate with the philosophers in Athens. Afterwards he returned to Antioch, then on a third journey he returned to the Churches already founded in Turkey, especially in Ephesus, and then in Greece and Corinth. Shortly after returning to Jerusalem, he was arrested by the Jews, and appealed to Rome. Then began his journey to Rome, but no longer in a state of freedom. He arrived in Rome around 60 or 61. Freed from prison in 63 he undertook another journey to Spain or to the communities under the direction of Timothy and Titus. Arrested again St Paul was martyred in 67.

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In his Homily for the Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul in 2021 Pope Francis spoke of them as *“two giants of the faith”* and says the Church *“sees two Apostles who set free the power of the Gospel in our world, only because first they themselves had been set free by their encounter with Christ. Jesus did not judge them or humiliate them. Instead, he shared their life with affection and closeness. He supported them by his prayer, and even at times reproached them to make them change. To Peter, Jesus gently says: ‘I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail’ (Luke 22:32) And to Paul: ‘Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?’ (Acts 9:4). He does the same with us: he assures us of his closeness by praying and interceding for us before the Father and gently reproaching us whenever we go astray, so that we can find the strength to arise and resume the journey.”*

Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, Pope Francis said earlier *“was set free above all from his sense of inadequacy and his bitter experience of failure, thanks to the unconditional love of Jesus.... He gave him courage to risk everything and the joy of becoming a fisher of men....He gave him – as we heard in the Gospel – the keys to open the doors leading to an encounter with the Lord and the power to bind and loose: to bind his brothers and sisters to Christ and to loosen the knots and chains in their lives (MT 16:19)”*. Pope Francis continued: *“The Apostle Paul also experienced the freedom brought by Christ.... He was set free from the religious fervour that had made him a zealous defender of his ancestral tradition (Gal 1:14) and a cruel persecutor of Christians.... making him open to the love of God and of his brothers and sisters.... and that nothing can ever separate us from His love”*

“We too” the Pope says *“have been touched by the Lord; we too have been set free. Yet we need to be set free time and time again. Like Peter, we are called to be set free from a sense of failure because of our occasionally disastrous fishing. To be set free from the fear that paralyzes us, makes us seek refuge in our own securities, and robs us of the courage to prophecy. Like Paul, we are called to be set free from hypocritical outward show....free from a religiosity that makes us rigid and inflexible.”* Pope Francis sums up his reflection on this great Feast with these words:

“Peter and Paul bequeathed to us the image of a Church entrusted to our hands, yet guided by the Lord with fidelity and tender love, for it is He who guides the Church. A Church that is weak, yet finds strength in the presence of God. The image of a Church set free and capable of offering the world the freedom that the world by itself cannot give: freedom from sin and death, from resignation, and from the sense of injustice and loss of hope that dehumanizes the lives of women and men of our time.... we can bring this freedom, but only if we first let ourselves be set free by the newness of Jesus, and walk in the freedom of the Spirit.”

“They drank the chalice of the Lord and become the friends of God”
Amen.

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