

2018 Patronal Festival – Northleach

Acts 12.1-11

Matthew 16.13-19

A church's Patronal or Dedication Festival celebrates the church's founding and the saints to which the church is dedicated. In one sense, today is this church's birthday which we celebrate in the company of two of the most remarkable of apostles – Peter and Paul.

No matter how many times I enter this church I am humbled by the continuity of worship that has existed on this site certainly for 800 years and quite probably considerably longer in earlier buildings. When Henry the Third granted the town the right to hold a market on a Wednesday in 1219 or 1220 he also gave the town the right to hold a fair on the eve of the feast of St Peter and St Paul, which we continue to honour in the Charter Fair held on the Saturday closest to 29th June. It is for this reason we are confident that the church's dedication dates back to at least 1220.

Continuity, of course, does not imply consistency, and this church has changed remarkably throughout its history both in terms of its structure and decoration and in terms of the worship and other activities undertaken within it. Continuity and change arguably characterise the life of the church throughout its 2000 years of evolution.

It might seem a little greedy to have two saints associated with a single church, but St Peter and St Paul have been tied together in the memory of the church ever since the 29th June was first honoured as their feast day in the 3rd century.

If we delve a little into their lives and personalities we quickly become aware of the advantages of remembering these two saints together despite their very different journeys to faith.

Peter you will recall accompanied Jesus throughout his earthly ministry; whilst Paul you will recall never met Jesus. Rather, Paul is recorded as persecuting the church until that memorable and dramatic experience on the road to Damascus that converted him into the church's leading evangelist.

Through the ordinary encounters of his life and the many mistakes he made, Peter teaches us much about faith, the forgiveness and the grace of God; not least through his threefold denial of Jesus following his arrest. Meanwhile Paul teaches us about God's heartfelt desire to draw all into the Kingdom of God, even those who seek out to destroy Him. And of course, Paul has left us a remarkable body of theological teaching through his extensive letters to the young churches.

Peter is described by Jesus as the rock or foundation upon which the church will be built and is considered by many to be the first Pope. Paul meanwhile might be described today as a church planter, for he had a missionary zeal for the gospel that took him far from home to share the gospel with Jew and Gentile alike.

In other words, we can begin to see how the whole church is embraced by the different experiences and approaches to faith of these two remarkable men: tradition and innovation; inherited and converted faith; practical and academic; catholic and evangelical.

As St Paul has his own feast day in January, the Bible readings for the festival of St Peter and St Paul often only feature Peter. Our readings today recall Peter receiving his commission as the founder of the church and the famous occasion on which Peter was sprung from prison through the work of the Holy Spirit.

And this reminds us of an important point of similarity between Peter and Paul. For all their differences, Peter and Paul were both astonished at the unexpected and many would say wholly inappropriate roles carved out for them by God. Peter was no natural leader; he often misunderstood Jesus, denied him vociferously several times and yet, for all his shortcomings, Jesus saw in him the most remarkable potential. Similarly, Paul was no saint, had damaged the church extensively, and was totally committed to its eradication. And yet God saw in him the most remarkable potential too.

All of which should give us much encouragement as we celebrate our birthday together. Our shortcomings are nothing compared with Peter and Paul so be ready for the most remarkable potential that God sees in us all.

Our community of Christians here in Northleach is no less diverse than the separate branches of Christendom represented by the two traditions of Peter and Paul. Such diversity is a wonderful gift and a great joy, yet it would be a very naïve Rector who pretended it didn't bring with it some tension, heartache and sometimes conflict, just as it did in the earliest days of the church. But all of that is worth bearing with for the delight of being able to worship in different styles, liturgies and traditions; for the different experiences of being church in this building and in the market-place through the café; for the challenge of sharing faith across all age ranges and social groups; for being able to respond to the needs of faithful worshippers and those new to faith.

As we continue to face the challenge of how to build a sustainable future for rural churches we would do well to draw upon the spiritual roots of our dedication and recognise how the Holy Spirit doesn't bear grudges for our mistakes but is remarkably forgiving to those who try to follow Jesus.

And try is all that we are called to do. Christians are susceptible to being ridiculed for not measuring up to Jesus' high standards and certainly some of Jesus' teaching is too tough for many of us to implement word for word. But Jesus never asked nor expected the impossible, only that we turn towards him, accept the frailties of our human nature and rejoice with awe at the majesty of his sovereignty.

As we enter what I think is our 791st year as a town and at least as many as that as the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul, we have a great deal to be grateful for and an enormous reservoir of prayer and spirituality from which to draw inspiration and to guide us into the future.

A vibrant and sustainable church of today is one that is rooted in the inheritance of the past but also open to creating the new traditions of the future. That sounds to me to be entirely consistent with our dedication saints - Peter and Paul – but also fitting in a local church and town of such diversity. Let us celebrate that together so that in 12 months-time it is even easier to look back and declare the great things that God has done for each one of us. Amen.