

St Peter and St Paul, 2009

This Feast Day of St Peter and St Paul holds a special place in my diverse experience of Church. I could well have ignored this feast –it’s actually on the calendar for tomorrow, but within a Church (capital “C” Church –and particularly Anglicanism) – that is confronted by a dazzling array of forms of Christian religious expression, I believe it has a real contemporary significance. It’s been part of my journey of faith, and certainly part of my struggles and challenges over the years, to find a way that gives honour to both these saints and the different traditions and theological accents they have come to represent.

It’s a funny mix to celebrate these two apostles in the same liturgical moment. As we gleaned from the children’s talk earlier, they were two very different men –different backgrounds, education, radically different ways of coming to know Christ. In common, together they are the foundation of the infant Church, yet in temperament and ministry they are nearly opposites. Peter was with Christ from the start; he was impetuous, and had trouble getting it right about who Jesus was, and we all know he denied his relationship with Christ. Yet he always repented and persevered, and it was he whom Jesus chose to become the foundation "rock" of the Church. And Paul, the most Jewish of Jews, fiery persecutor of Christ’s followers, converted in a sudden and blinding encounter with the long ascended Christ. Paul had the insight to realize that the early Christian Church had to give up its "Jewishness" if it was to be truly universal; and he had the courage to maintain his conviction even in face of strong and sometimes violent opposition.

These are strange bedfellows indeed. They are celebrated together only because that in the memory of the church is the tradition that both were martyred under the Emperor Nero in 60s of the first century. Between them, they account for over half of the New Testament, either as subjects of narratives or as authors, real or supposed, of the documents themselves. There was some difference in their doctrinal positions, although more recent scholarship has narrowed a lot of the old gaps between them. But historically a clear line was drawn between churches, such as reformed protestant and evangelical churches -who tend to emphasise and preach from Paul almost exclusively; and churches -like us in the catholic tradition of the Anglican church -whose focus is primarily on the Gospels. Peter, of course, is acknowledged and accepted as the primary apostle in the beginnings of the Roman Catholic Church.

Yet I think it’s very fitting for us to celebrate these two together. The reality of the Church today is that we are a very mixed bag of believers, with greatly different doctrinal positions, greatly different ways of approaching the Scriptures and many different ways of doing church, in the ways we worship. And that’s just in the Anglican community! It’s all too easy to line ourselves up according to what we think the right way of doing church is, or according to minutiae of doctrine and belief – and say that our way is right and others are wrong.

When I lived in Sydney, as a regular Sydney-style Anglican evangelical (which is different from “low church” - “low church” in Sydney is regarded as high church there), what was held in high regard was identifying oneself as being “born again”. There, too, the Bible was held as being both literally true and the primary means by which God communicated. There was a different language – “conversion

experiences” rather than “faith journeys”, and things like candles on the altar and vestments and symbols weren’t part of how one “did church”. It’s unfortunate that sometimes there was a degree of judging and marginalising of those who didn’t fit that mould. But isn’t that something all of us have the potential to do?

Once upon a time, ten years or so ago, as I was making my move out of that style of Anglican tradition to this way of being Anglican, I would have related this in a way to make it seem how wrong they were. Just as at one stage earlier in my life I would have joined in the judging of those who were different. But all that sort of judging is to sink into a game of “who’s got the truth?”, and is actually a distorted faith where unity has to equal conformity, and where diversity can’t be tolerated. It’s sad to see this game being played by many wherever they fit along the spectrum of tradition – entrenched advocates of each tradition judging the others on often quite superficial matters.

To “not play the game” doesn’t mean not standing up for a theological position that we think is right; but it does mean not chucking out the baby with the bathwater. I stand here today as a woman and priest who had to leave home and family and all that was dear to me in Sydney to follow the call to the priesthood, because in that Diocese my calling was not acceptable. But I also stand here today as a Christian whose faith was formed in that same Diocese, in all its reformed evangelical fundamentalism. I have journeyed away from much of that theological bent, but I cannot deny that there was a lot of good learning there. And it still remains that God is strongly at work in the lives of people, whatever tradition they are part of. It’s Christ’s Church, his body, and he works in it and through it regardless of our weaknesses and failings and distortions as Church.

Take a moment to reflect on the influences on your own Christian journeys –what has formed you and led you to the faith you hold today? What’s at the core, the heart of your faith?

So – St Peter and St Paul – what can they offer us in a Church - the world wide Anglican Communion- that can quarrel so disgracefully over many things?

Peter and Paul point us back to who we are as Church; they offer us a certain unity in the midst of diversity. They offer us the freedom that in following Christ the greatest and only conformity that matters is the laying of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the Church – Christ’s own body. Though Jesus told Peter that the church would be built upon him, “the church’s [real] foundation is Jesus Christ its Lord.” Not a foundation based on whether our clergy dress up in vestments or in casual gear, or whether we have incense and candles on the altar or an altar that’s wheeled in once a month, not whether we sing to bass guitars and drum-kits or to organs: our foundation is based on the fact of Jesus Christ –incarnated, crucified, resurrected and ascended. This is his Church –his very body. Jesus is the one who commissioned Peter : “Feed my sheep”, we heard in our Gospel today. It is Jesus who stood by Paul and gave him strength to bring the Gospel to the broader world.

Here in Melbourne, we are increasingly seeing a greater diversity in what is practiced and believed in the Anglican Church. In this parish, at this time, we hold to a catholic tradition of the Anglican Church, expressed in the way we worship and how we understand the Scriptures. We have invested parish money in an organ because we believe our worship is enhanced by good organ accompaniment. In ten or twenty

years time, that decision might be laughed at, as the space over there is cleared to make way for the drum kits. I projected images onto the wall of the sanctuary, something I know a number of you are uncomfortable about. In ten years time, there may well be a dedicated screen somewhere out the front here that is used in every worship service as prayer books and hymn books give way for projected words. That's how it is already in many parishes around us. I probably won't be the one who leads you into those changes –but I might be. This is not a warning or a prophecy – it's simply a statement that things can change. And if –when- such things come to pass, remember St Peter and St Paul.

Remember that in these two diverse men, we see the work of God, using and equipping different people for God's kingdom, without division; using diversity to build God's kingdom. And we see the meaning of true unity of the faith – Peter and Paul, their lives built on Christ, their passion fuelled by their commitment and faithfulness to Christ, and the Church they formed and shaped, built on the one foundation of Jesus Christ our Lord. That faithfulness and commitment is all that Christ calls us to; and it is he who leads and equips us in the building on his foundation.