

Commentary on Sunday Scripture

Solemnity of Saints Peter & Paul

First reading:

(Acts 12:1-11)

Peter is released from prison

The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles show the earliest Church at Jerusalem being led by Peter. The later chapters recount the mission of Paul to the gentiles. This story tells of a near disaster, averted by divine intervention.

Had Peter, as well as James, been martyred at this early stage, the Church might have been left without leaders and could hardly have survived. It is one of the many accounts of divine intervention to free the apostles from the prisons to which their fearless witness to Christ brought them. Several times the whole group of apostles had been imprisoned by the Jewish authorities for their witness and miraculously released.

This full account is paralleled by the release of Paul from prison in Thessalonika through an earthquake; the stories of Peter and Paul are parallel in many ways. The lesson is that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church at every stage and was looking after its members as they proclaimed the gospel. The story is superbly told, with the amusing picture of Peter, still half-asleep, being guided at every step by the angel, like a sleepy child, woken up in the middle of the night.

Question:

Would the Church have collapsed had Peter been executed?

Second reading:

(2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 17-18)

Paul's Farewell

Writing to his follower Timothy, Paul sums up and defends his mission, confident in the divine help he has received throughout his trials as an apostle. We do not know what this 'rescue from the lion's mouth' was, but he was shipwrecked several times on his missionary journeys, and also imprisoned, beaten and flogged by both Jews and Roman authorities.

He persevered in his apostolate, but he yearned to be fully united with his Lord and ours. He was very conscious that he and all Christians are baptized into Christ's death, rise with Christ in his Resurrection, and so live with Christ's life: 'Life to me, of course, is Christ, and death would be a positive gain' (Philippians 2.21). He was held back by the positive need for his energetic guidance by the communities he had founded all over the eastern Mediterranean.

The sporting images of 'the good fight' and the 'race' are typical of Paul. The games were as important as football matches today. He uses also the image of a libation: in Roman society the first few drops were poured out from a cup of wine, as a symbol of offering to the gods. Paul now feels that he is approaching the end of his journey.

Question:

Can you make any of Paul's self-defence your own?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 16.13-19)

Jesus Claims Peter as Rock

At last in this gospel reading, Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ and Son of the living God. At last he realizes that in Jesus they can see the action of God.

The disciples had followed Jesus as soon as he called, but for a long time they were puzzled what to make of him, of his wonderful teaching and his godlike personality. Now comes a shaft of light and understanding.

We too often take some time to appreciate the true worth of someone we know well: a little gesture can sometimes reveal just how generous and thoughtful they are. The impulsive Peter suddenly grasps that there is God, acting among them, a daunting or even terrifying thought.

Jesus replies to Peter's recognition with his own generosity, giving him a new name, 'Rock', for this is what 'Peter' means. Jesus makes Peter the Rock on which his Church is founded. The promise of authority which Jesus here gives to Peter he also gives to the community itself, 'where two or three are gathered in my name' (Matthew 18.18-19). Peter is the rock of unity in the Church; he and his successors speak in the name of the Church.

Question:

Why did Jesus choose such an impetuous and unreliable character as "Rock"?
