

Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul-A

Of all those outstanding individuals who worked to bring about the early Church, the two really indispensable figures were Peter and Paul. In many ways, Peter and Paul are a study in contrasts.

Simon bar Jonah, Peter's original name, was from the no nonsense fishing village of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee; a hard working man, no doubt a skilled fisherman and a skilled businessman. There is evidence in fact that Galilean fishermen of the 1st century did business with people from all over the eastern Roman Empire. So, Peter was no slouch, he was probably an accomplished small businessman, we might say. He probably knew at least some Greek to go along with his native Aramaic. Greek was the lingua franca of the time. If you were doing business outside your home area you probably had to do it in Greek. At the same time, Peter was no academic; he was not a man of books. Because we hear about his mother-in-law, we know he was married.

In contrast we find Paul, formerly Saul, from the town of Tarsus: a small town on the southern coast of present day Turkey. Saul was a son of the Jewish diaspora. In these very early days, Jews had made their way around the Roman Empire away from the homeland of Palestine but still reverencing all their great traditions.

Though he took up the trade of tent making, young Saul was a scholar; he was a lover of books. Most likely he received a good solid Greek education in that Hellenistic environment; he would have studied Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. While still a young man, Saul was sent to Jerusalem to study with the greatest scholar of the time Gamaliel. He would have been immersed in the study of the ancient scriptures. He would have learned the subtle methods of interpretation taught by the Rabbis. As such, he became quite zealous for the faith of his fathers.

One day, we hear in the scriptures, Simon bar Jonah met Jesus, a young man from the neighboring town of Nazareth. Jesus told this experienced fisherman to put out into deep water and lower his nets for a catch. The command must have, at the very least, puzzled Simon. He explained that they had been at it all night and had caught nothing; implying that they knew what they were doing. But something in this Jesus must have compelled him to obey and so he said, *if you say so, we will do it.*

When they brought in that miraculous catch of fish, Simon bar Jonah fell at the feet of Jesus and he said: Lord, leave me, I am a sinful man. This scene so beautifully catches so much of Simon's character: flawed, a sinner by his own admission; but also honest, simple, and deeply intuitive. Somehow from the beginning Simon knew who Jesus was. How easy it would have been simply to brush him off. Upon taking in that great catch, he intuited so quickly and so accurately who Jesus was.

There's no doubt that Simon emerged quickly enough as leader of Jesus' disciples. It's no great surprise when Jesus in the midst of His public ministry asked that famously

strange question at Caesarea Philippi: *who do people say that I am?* It was not the people who knew the answer, nor the apostles as a body who knew the answer; but it was Simon bar Jonah displaying that familiar intuitive skill who knew the answer. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Because of that Jesus changed Simon's name: you are Kephas (in the Aramaic), Petros (in the Greek), you are Rock and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Simon Peter with all his weakness, with all his impulsiveness, all of his sins nevertheless knew who Jesus was and upon that knowledge the Church was built and upon that knowledge the Church is still sustained.

As we talk about Peter, it is his love for Jesus that matters most. Simon do you love me; Lord, you know I love you. That's the key to knowing Jesus. You have to fall in love with Him as Simon did.

Saul of Tarsus certainly never met or saw Jesus during the Lord's earthly sojourn. He wasn't like Peter here, who lived in closely with Christ. Saul might have heard about Him but that's all. He certainly knew about early Christianity and everything about it got on his nerves. It seemed to this passionate, devotee of the Law to be a blasphemy and a betrayal; a Jewish movement that undermined the monotheistic foundations of Judaism. And therefore with all his skill in speech and organization, and with all his characteristically furious energy, Saul of Tarsus went after Christians. *How zealous he was in persecuting the early Church!*

Then came that moment, one of the most decisive in history, Jesus met Saul at the height of his persecution on the road to Damascus. *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?!?*

Paul later described the event this way: *the one who called me from my mother's womb chose to reveal His Son to me.* Ahhh, he got it too! Once he had seen the risen Christ, he knew who He was. The Son of God, as Peter had also confessed. His encounter with the risen Jesus turned his whole life upside down. It changed him decisively and forever.

So powerful was this experience for Paul that he could say that compared to Christ, the Law itself was so much garbage. Like Peter, Paul fell in love with Christ. Christianity is NOT a philosophy. It is a relationship to person. These two friends of Jesus now become the great Apostles we know.

Not long after this do we hear that Paul and Peter met in Jerusalem. They spent several weeks together, as it were, comparing notes, comparing their teachings, and decided they were on the same page. Peter it was concluded should be an Apostle to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. And so it went. Undoubtedly, many years later they met again in Rome. Most likely it was in the Trastevere neighborhood of Rome, the Jewish quarter of the ancient city. They both died in the Nero persecutions of 64 AD. Paul, because he

was a Roman citizen, had the privilege of being beheaded. Peter was put to death by upside down crucifixion.

Why were these two great figures in Rome? Because they knew that Jesus was meant to be King of the whole world; that through Christ all the nations were to come to the God of Israel. They both knew it was Jesus, and not Caesar and his ilk, who is the true Lord. And so they went to the capital of the world with this message. And it is because of these two men that we followers of Jesus Christ are here today.

My brothers and sisters, let us pray that in our encounter with Christ we will have our lives turned upside down and will come to know and to love Him as did these great Apostles. And through us may Christ be made known to the whole world by how we live and how we die.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella