

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate our Patronal Festival, giving thanks for the lives and examples of the two saints after which this church is named – St Peter and St Paul.

It is great that we are doing this in a number of different ways. Many of us enjoyed a musical evening yesterday, when the Aveley and Newham Brass Band, presented a varied programme of music for our Proms in the Pews.

Today we have our morning services, followed by Cream Teas this afternoon. The Church will again be filled with music this evening, as we are joined by the Bishop of Rochester in the singing of favourite hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God.

On Thursday this week, Peter Smith will be leading our study morning at the Friars, exploring our own journeys of faith. On Saturday, families will gather in The Vicarage Garden for an afternoon of fun including games and refreshments.

It is good that we should celebrate in all these different ways, because in remembering the lives and example of St Peter and St Paul, we are essentially celebrating and giving thanks that God calls each one of us into the fellowship of his church family, so that we too might share with St Peter and St Paul and all the saints in the work of building God's kingdom in our own time.

St Peter and St Paul were two very different characters...

Paul – originally known as Saul, was a Roman citizen, educated to the equivalent of an Oxbridge standard, a leader within the Jewish community, an eloquent writer and orator. He was passionate about serving God and upholding the faith. However, in the early days, before his conversion on the Damascus Road, this meant trying to destroy the early Church.

Peter – originally known as Simon, was from the small Galilean village of Bethsaida and subsequently lived in Capernaum; with little or no formal education, working as a fisherman with his brother Andrew and their business partners James and John.

He could be impulsive, quick to anger, but, was essentially a solid character with a desire to love and serve God.

Although from very different backgrounds, with very different gifts and temperaments, both men were united in responding to the call of Jesus to follow him and to share in his work of building God's Kingdom.

For both of them, although the call from Jesus came in very different ways, responding to his call marked a key turning point in their lives.

For Paul, the blinding light encounter with the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus, meant a complete re-evaluation of his life, his mission, his identity. To cut a long story short, it was at this point that his name was changed from Saul to Paul, and the man who had been a vicious persecutor of the Christian community, became a champion of the Gospel message and a leader and preacher who has inspired many thousands of people in his and subsequent generations to follow in the way of Christ.

For Peter, the call to follow Jesus, marked a similar turning point. In the middle of his ordinary everyday work as a fisherman, he came face to face with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There was something about his charisma and his power to miraculously predict that the fishing net would be full if it was thrown over the other side of the boat, that inspired Peter to follow. Together with Andrew, James and John, Peter left everything that was familiar to him, and committed his life to following in the way of Christ. He journeyed with Christ during the next three years, listening to his teaching, witnessing his miracles, caught up with the crowds, both in joyful welcome and in their angry rejection. Peter came to see that Jesus was no ordinary man – he recognised that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus acknowledged this by giving Simon a new name – Cephas, or Peter – the “Rock” on which he would build the church.

So we see that both Paul and Peter responded to the call of Jesus, to follow him. Both embraced it passionately and committed their lives to helping others recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, the one in whom we find the way to eternal life.

That is certainly something worth celebrating and giving thanks for! One of the traditional ways of celebrating and giving thanks to God is through song. This is a tradition that goes right back to the psalmists of Old Testament times and has continued right through into our modern day songs.

As you know, every now and again, I feel prompted by the Spirit to compose a song. 11 years ago, I felt moved to write a song for the celebration of a patronal festival. It was for the feast day of St James. However, the words of the song are just as appropriate as we gather here today to celebrate our calling to follow in the way of Christ, and give thanks to God for Peter and Paul and all the saints who have helped and inspired us in our own journeys of faith.

You might like to look at the words, which you have on a separate sheet.

In the first verse, we ask God's blessing on this Church, in which Christians have gathered in prayer and praise for 1000 years. For both Peter and Paul, gathering together as the church family - to pray and give thanks to God was vitally important.

*O Lord bless this house of prayer and praise;
Where we come to you with our thankful hearts;
Where we share with you, all our hopes and fears;
And renew our trust in you.*

In his letter to the Colossian Church, Paul encourages them to sing, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with gratitude in their hearts, giving thanks to God the Father.

It is in drawing close to God, in prayer and praise, that we strengthen and renew our trust in God. A trust, which Peter and Paul never lost, despite very real personal hardships and sufferings that they endured for the sake of following in the way of Christ.

In his letters Paul talks about the many shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments, occasions of near starvation and many other hardships which he experienced for the sake of carrying the Gospel message throughout the Mediterranean world.

It is clear from their writings that Paul, Peter and the other Apostles endured all of these things, and made the sacrifices that they did in their lives, because of the faith and trust that they had in God.

It is remarkable, that despite all the hardships, in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote this:

“And so we rejoice in our hope of sharing in God’s glory. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

Moving on to think about the second verse – in which we ask God’s presence with us, as we meet in his name.

*Lord, be with us now as we hear your word;
Be within our hearts as we share your peace.
In the broken bread, and the wine outpoured,
Your deep love for us is clear.*

In the Acts of the Apostles, and in the letters of Paul and Peter, we build up a picture of members of the early church meeting together in each other’s houses to study God’s word, to talk and pray together, to share in remembering the Last Supper with Jesus, by the breaking of the bread and sharing of the wine.

It was this fellowship and growing together that prepared them daily to share in the work of spreading the good news of God's love made known in the life of Christ.

In the third verse, we celebrate something that both Peter and Paul were passionate about – the conviction that we are all one in Christ.

*May we welcome all as they enter in;
For you teach us all that we're one in you;
Whether young or old; whether rich or poor,
We're all precious in your eyes.*

In both their letters, and in their speeches recorded in the Acts of the Apostle, Peter and Paul counselled against anything that might cause division within the church and lead to the formation of separate Jewish and Gentile congregations.

It is Peter who addresses the crowds on the day of Pentecost to declare that the Spirit has been poured out so that people of every tongue and race can hear the Gospel message in their own language – God's love is for all.

It is Peter who had the vision of the blanket coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of food, traditionally prohibited to eat under Jewish Law, and yet he hears a voice calling him to get up and eat! And Peter paints a picture of a living temple, in which each one of us is a “living stone,” out of which the church is built.

It is of course Paul who writes in his Letter to the Galatians, that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male of female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul gives us the wonderful image of the Body of Christ, made up of many parts, each with its own special role and function as part of the whole.

The final verse of the hymn, reminds us, that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are all called to be sent out as ambassadors for Christ, so that through our words and actions, others may come to see and know God’s love at work in their lives:

Lord, now send us out, as your saints of old;
With your Spirit as our strength and shield;
Through our acts of love, daily serving you,
May we all your kingdom build.

For Peter and Paul, the Holy Spirit was the key to understanding the changes in their own lives.

In their writings we see their belief that it is the Holy Spirit - which empowers, guides, shapes and transforms.

In their letters and throughout the Acts of the Apostles, we see that it was the Holy Spirit which enabled both Peter and Paul to see that it was not religious rules and regulations which mattered, but living life in the Spirit. More important than the blind observance of ritual ceremonies, was their deep love of God, and desire to do his will.

In prayer, it is the Spirit, which gives voice to our deepest desires and concerns.

In our lives, as we seek to put off the old, and put on the new – it is the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, kindness humility and patience, which bear witness to the likeness of Christ growing within us.

In our relationships with one another, it is the Holy Spirit which enables us to break down old prejudices and barriers, and to see our unity in Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit, which enables us to recognise and use the God given skills and talents which we each possess in the service of Christ, and in the building up of the life of his church as the family of God.

I end by sharing with you the words of the hymn as a prayer meditation:

House of Prayer and Praise

In Celebration of Patronal Festival

Composed by Jonathan Hall

O Lord bless this house of prayer and praise;
Where we come to you with our thankful hearts;
Where we share with you, all our hopes and fears;
And renew our trust in you.

Lord, be with us now as we hear your word;
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