

June 29, 2025

The Festival of St. Peter and St. Paul

Texts: Acts 15:1-21; Matthew 16:13-19

Throughout history, the Lord God has called all manner of people to follow Him. He has gathered sheep scattered throughout the world into His one flock, being their one Shepherd. As today we remember and give thanks for two of the apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, we see how the Lord still calls all manner of people today and unites them under the great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

It's hard to imagine two more different paths to becoming a follower of Jesus than those down which our Lord led Peter and Paul. Consider first their backgrounds before He called them. Peter – who was then only called Simon – was a simple fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. We don't know much about his upbringing, but it's very likely that his father was a fisherman, and his father before him.

Simon wouldn't have received much formal education aside from learning the Scriptures in the synagogue every Sabbath; mostly just following along with dad and the other fishermen and learning their trade. It was hard work, and dangerous – as the storms would prove – but it was a living. Catch fish, sell fish, fix nets, eat, sleep, do it all again tomorrow.

Pretty repetitive – until his brother Andrew comes along with a surprising invitation. “We have found the Messiah!” When Simon follows his brother to meet this Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus looks at Simon – not just a glance, but the eyes of God looking into his very soul – and declares, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas.” Cephas, or in the Greek, Petros – Peter.

Shortly after, Jesus will call Peter and Andrew, as well as their fishing partners James and John, to follow Him. And from that point, over highs and lows, triumphs and falls, St. Peter is a fisher of men.

Let's go back now and consider Paul's background. He too originally went by a different name – Saul. Yet for him, it wasn't a matter of being renamed by Jesus. No, it reflected the more urbane, sophisticated world in which he lived. He was a Jew, and a zealous one at that, being a student of the Pharisees. From early on, he would've spent his days studying the Scriptures, learning them, committing them to memory. And Saul also would've learned the teachings and traditions of the elders, the additions and opinions which had built up around the Scriptures over the centuries.

But Saul the Jew was also Paul the Roman citizen. He was originally from the leading city of Tarsus, a melting pot of Cilician, Greek, Persian, Eastern, and Roman influences. As we read in the book of Acts, not only did Paul know the Old Testament like the back of his hand, but he was also well-versed in Greek poetry and philosophy.

But this exposure to Gentile thought didn't water down his zeal for the religion of his fathers, and when we first meet him, Saul is a chief persecutor of a new and – in his mind, blasphemous – messianic sect. He goes throughout Jerusalem and Judea, imprisoning and even helping condemn to death those who would claim this Jesus of Nazareth to be the prophesied Messiah. He gets letters

granting authority to do the same in Damascus, trying to stop this sect before it can corrupt even more people.

But on the road, Saul is overwhelmed with a light from heaven, cast to the ground and blinded, and a voice booms from heaven: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” In terror, he cries out, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Imagine the sickening terror that must have swept over Saul at that point. He has been doing the very thing even his teacher Gamaliel warned against: fighting against God.

But before Saul can fall into further dread, Jesus tells him, “But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Being led by the hand into Damascus, Saul spends three days in darkness before a Christian named Ananias is sent by Jesus to absolve and baptize him. From that point on, Christians would say with surprise and joy, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.”

So on the one hand, we have a simple fisherman who gradually learns to trust in the Lord who called him from beside the sea and walked with him for several years. On the other hand, we have a well-educated and well-traveled Jew with Roman citizenship who is called in a blaze of light and turned from persecutor into proclaimer. What is it that united these two very different men? Having the Lord God put into their hearts the glorious truth which Peter confesses to Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The first thing we need to note about this confession, or really the faith that believes and speaks this confession, is that it is itself a gift of God. When Peter proclaims this glorious truth, how does Jesus respond? “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Though Peter had seen plenty of miracles and signs performed by Jesus, signs pointing to the truth of Jesus’ word and the heavenly origin of His mission, it couldn’t be signs alone that could lead him to this confession.

Nor could a purely intellectual understanding of the word lead to this confession. Paul had an understanding of the Law and the Prophets that few could even come close to, and yet without the gift of faith in the heart, sinful pride and anger turned this knowledge toward blaspheming the God who gave it and persecuting those who rightly worshiped Him. No, it was God who brought true understanding to Paul as He had to Peter. And this is true throughout the Bible. Faith is always a gift given by the loving God to man.

Another gift given to both these men was that of forgiveness. Both Peter and Paul committed sins great and small against the Lord. Right after making the great confession of who Jesus is, Peter tries to rebuke Jesus and in turn is told “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter would also deny Jesus three times to save his own skin. Paul actively worked to destroy the proclamation of the Gospel, bringing great harm and suffering upon those who dared to confess Jesus as Christ. By his own admission, he considered himself the foremost of sinners.

Yet in that very same verse, Paul writes that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Jesus came as the Christ to pay the price for sin: for Peter’s denials, for Paul’s persecutions, for all the sins of

all mankind. And through the faith given to these apostles, that forgiveness was credited to them. It's the same thing that Peter himself speaks of when describing God saving the Gentiles, "having cleansed their hearts by faith... we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

When the Lord saved Peter and Paul and cleansed their hearts by faith, He gave them new lives. Peter didn't remain a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Paul didn't continue to be a Pharisee. No, Peter begins fishing for men, casting the net of God's Word out that many may be gathered into the boat of the Church. Paul, as soon as he recovers his strength, returns to the familiar setting of the synagogue, but does so in order to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

The Lord Jesus makes these two men His apostles, His representatives to the whole world. Peter is sent (mostly) to the Jews, and Paul (mostly) to the Gentiles, but the proclamation they bring is the same, centered around the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Regardless of whether they are preaching in Jerusalem or Samaria or Galatia or Rome, the Lord is using them to bring people of all nations into His holy Church, washing away sins and granting new life.

This wouldn't be an easy path for these two apostles. The reason the paraments are red this Sunday is in remembrance of their martyrdom. Both Peter and Paul would suffer considerably as they went about doing the task given them by the Lord. Both would have to flee from those who desired to kill them. Both would be unjustly imprisoned.

And according to the histories of the Church handed down to us, both would be put to death outside of Rome, martyred under the emperor Nero. Peter would be crucified, but not seeing himself as worthy of dying in the same way as his Lord, insisted on being crucified upside down. Paul, as a Roman citizen, wouldn't be crucified, but instead was beheaded by the executioners of the empire. The fisherman and the Pharisee both laid down their lives for the sake of the One who had laid down His life for them.

But because both died trusting in the glorious truth that Jesus was Lord, both didn't truly die. Yes, their bodies perished, but their souls were taken to heaven to be with the Lord, joined to that great heavenly host with all the faithful who had gone before them. They had remained faithful unto death and were awarded that glorious crown of life, which their Lord Jesus had won for them on the cross. The gates of hell had assaulted both Peter and Paul severely, but just as the Lord had promised, they had not been able to overcome these two pillars of the Church.

The examples of the apostles St. Peter and St. Paul are a great blessing to us today who are in that one holy Christian and apostolic Church. The reason why we confess the Church to be apostolic is that it is built on the truths proclaimed and handed down to us by the apostles. Chief of these truths is St. Peter's confession, the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

As Christians, we declare with the Church throughout the world and throughout history that Jesus, the baby born of the Virgin Mary, was and is the eternal Son of God and therefore God Himself.

This God in human flesh came as the Christ, the One promised by God to reconcile man to Himself through offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice.

Through the divinely-given faith and trust in this truth, we are joined to the Christ, reconciled to God, and made adopted sons and daughters of God, to live with Him for all eternity. There is so much packed into that simple confession, but it is the core of what it is to be in the Church.

In addition to giving us faith in this wonderful truth, Jesus also gives us forgiveness, just as He had to Peter and Paul. These two men had committed horrible sins, but by grace were convicted of their sins and turned away from them and back to the Lord. When the devil would tempt us to think that we have sinned beyond what God can forgive, we can look to the examples of Peter and Paul and see that, no, whoever sincerely calls out to God for forgiveness will be forgiven.

We also see through these apostles how the Lord gives Christians new lives. This isn't only life after we die, either. We have new lives here and now. You may not be called to leave everything behind and travel across the globe to witness to Christ, like the apostles. But you are called to live entirely for Christ, your life being a sacrifice to God, as both Peter and Paul write. Through sinners cleansed and sanctified by Christ, you and me and all Christians, the Lord shines His light into the world. The truth that Jesus is the Christ is witnessed as we speak and live out these new lives given us by the Holy Spirit.

Seeing these new lives, the devil will rage, roaming about as a roaring lion seeking souls to devour, as St. Peter writes. He will attack both from outside the church and from within, by false brothers secretly brought in, as St. Paul speaks of. The world will seek to lure Christians away by false understandings of happiness and love, and then will be enraged at those who refuse to go along with its falsehoods. You will suffer for faithfulness in one form or another – Jesus Himself tells you this, just as He made clear both to Peter and to Paul.

Yet joined to Jesus, suffering will not be the end. Standing on the rock of the confession of Christ, death will not prevail. Wherever this life may take us, we know that our destination is the New Jerusalem which shines with the very light of God, echoing with the endless praises of the Lamb sung by the countless white-robed host.

Within the halls of Zion, all the saints are gathered together: the patriarchs and prophets, the apostles and evangelists, those who died believing in the promise of the coming Christ and those who died believing in the Christ who had died and risen again. There are those like St. Peter and St. Paul, who were used by our Lord to do great deeds for His Church, and those who lived as faithful Christians but whose names are known only to the Lord.

All are the people of God, called from all times and places and given the glorious truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

In His holy name, amen.