

Solemnity of Saints of Peter & Paul, Apostles June 29th, 2025

Reading I – Acts 12:1-11

In those days, King Herod laid hands upon some members of the Church to harm them.

He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword,
and when he saw that this was pleasing to the Jews
he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

—It was the feast of Unleavened Bread.—

He had him taken into custody and put in prison
under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each.
He intended to bring him before the people after Passover.
Peter thus was being kept in prison,
but prayer by the Church was fervently being made
to God on his behalf.

On the very night before Herod was to bring him to trial,
Peter, secured by double chains,
was sleeping between two soldiers,
while outside the door guards kept watch on the prison.
Suddenly the angel of the Lord stood by him
and a light shone in the cell.
He tapped Peter on the side and awakened him, saying,
“Get up quickly.”
The chains fell from his wrists.
The angel said to him, “Put on your belt and your sandals.”
He did so.
Then he said to him, “Put on your cloak and follow me.”
So he followed him out,
not realizing that what was happening through the angel was real;
he thought he was seeing a vision.
They passed the first guard, then the second,
and came to the iron gate leading out to the city,
which opened for them by itself.
They emerged and made their way down an alley,
and suddenly the angel left him.
Then Peter recovered his senses and said,
“Now I know for certain
that the Lord sent his angel
and rescued me from the hand of Herod
and from all that the Jewish people had been expecting.”

We celebrate two of the main heroes of the early Church with this feast, Peter and Paul. Both coming from a Jewish background and called by Jesus to follow him and to continue his mission of proclaiming the kingdom in two distinctly different ways: Peter, a simple Jewish fisherman who was privileged to walk with Jesus, known as a charismatic man from Nazareth, who touched the lives of people through his courageous preaching, healing, and fierce commitment to the truth—a commitment that would lead to his arrest and death on the cross. Thinking that this great leader who was thought to be God’s promised Messiah would overthrow the Roman oppression, Peter and the earlier followers had to work through the trauma and grief of losing their friend and leader, but had their life-transforming experience in the post-resurrection appearances. Then we have Paul who had a life-altering experience of Jesus as Risen Lord while traveling to Damascus. He also was a Jew, but he strictly observed the law and customs of Judaism and believed that the early members of the Jesus movement (who also came from a Jewish background) were heretics who needed to be put to death—until he had his experience of Jesus as Risen Lord. Both men were strong leaders. Both experienced hardships. And both are said to be martyred in Rome. We catch glimpses of their lives in the readings today.

Acts 12:1-11. Luke, who tells the story of the Spirit at work in the early Church after the death and resurrection of Jesus, gives us a sampling of the hardships of early community members—many who were put to death by Herod. Herod knew this was pleasing to the Jews who had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. After James and John were killed, he sets his sights on Peter, arrests him on a Jewish feast (Unleavened Bread) but decides to keep him in prison until a week after Passover. In this reading we learn about Peter’s miraculous escape with the help of an “angel.” Although he is secured by chains and sleeping between two soldiers, he is awakened and has a surreal experience of being led past the guards until he is again in the city. The angel leaves him, and he is free to continue his mission.

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

R. (5) The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the LORD;
the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.

Glorify the LORD with me,
let us together extol his name.
I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.

R. The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy,
and your faces may not blush with shame.
When the poor one called out, the LORD heard,
and from all his distress he saved him.

R. The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.

The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
Taste and see how good the LORD is;
blessed the man who takes refuge in him.

R. The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.

Reading II – 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18

I, Paul, am already being poured out like a libation,
and the time of my departure is at hand.
I have competed well; I have finished the race;
I have kept the faith.
From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me,
which the Lord, the just judge,
will award to me on that day, and not only to me,
but to all who have longed for his appearance.

The Lord stood by me and gave me strength,
so that through me the proclamation might be completed
and all the Gentiles might hear it.
And I was rescued from the lion's mouth.
The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat
and will bring me safe to his heavenly Kingdom.
To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18. Along with 1 Timothy and the letter to Titus, they are referred to as the pastoral letters. More recently, scholars have considered this—or at least sections of it—as the last of Paul's letters written around the year 65 CE. Paul is in prison in Rome and awaiting a second hearing. During the first one, he was happy that he was able to give witness to his faith before the Gentiles who were present. There is a tone of resignation in Paul's tone as he shares a "summary" of his experiences, of carrying out his life's mission to bring others to Christ. As we know, there was reward but also hardships—being ejected from synagogues and towns, being pelted with stones and left for dead, shipwreck. Paul and Peter are two of our great heroes, and we remember them this coming weekend—along with the women and men who courageously helped the early Church grow!

Gospel – Matthew 16:13-19

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi
he asked his disciples,
“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”
They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah,
still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”
He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”
Simon Peter said in reply,
“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”
Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.
And so I say to you, you are Peter,
and upon this rock I will build my Church,
and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.
I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven.
Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven;
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 16:13-19. Matthew’s gospel was written around 90 CE by a person who knew well the Jewish background of the community. It’s important that we see the early Church (ecclesia) in the context of Judaism with a segment of its people evolving into a new awareness of themselves because of their acceptance of Jesus. This, of course, entailed change that would cause conflict with those members who were staunchly locked into a mindset that couldn’t accept Jesus as the Messiah promised by God throughout their Old Testament history. We know that eventually, the Church grew out of strict adherence to the old as it grew.

Since we are celebrating Peter and Paul this weekend, we turn to the passage in the gospel that has Jesus conferring upon Peter an authority that would place him in charge of shepherding but also interpreting the evolving beliefs of this new community. Exactly how this unfolds as well as what happens after the death of Peter requires a careful study of the early Church and how it came to provide continuity in the growing tradition—especially moving into our current understanding of the pope and his role. If you have time, you might want to check Mark chapter 8 and Luke chapter 9 to compare the different ways in this interaction between Jesus and Peter is described.

Comments/Questions: Since we are focusing on the two men this weekend, perhaps we can consider some questions for our consideration. First, given that Paul was vigorously opposed to the new group emerging in Judaism and was adamant about his “mission” to eliminate it, he was known as a staunch defender of traditional Judaism and was a man feared by early followers of Jesus who were reluctant to accept his change of heart, this could be encouragement for people who lived lives contrary to the gospel. God’s grace can work miracles and such people can become

“saints.” In addition to their deep conviction about who Jesus is for them, both Peter and Paul were both extremely courageous, where do we see the courageous living out of our faith in today’s world? Or is there such a phenomenon? Peter’s identifying Jesus as the “Christ” was good for the moment and commended by Jesus; however, he needed to grow in his understanding of what this meant—i.e., he protested when Jesus began predicting his passion and death. Jesus had to reprimand him and remind him that he was not sent by God to build a powerful army to overthrow the Romans. Has our understanding changed over the years—has our comprehension of who Jesus is evolved or grown? How? How has your spiritual life changed over the years? Are there certain new practices that you have adopted as your faith has matured? If you were going to write a final letter to someone you have been close to (as Paul to Timothy), how would you symbolically describe your faith journey with its ups and downs?

Sources: Paulist Biblical Commentary, John L. McKenzie’s Dictionary of the Bible, The Catholic Study Bible (New American Edition), and.....believe it or not, Wikipedia now has some very good articles on the Bible—complete with sources including our Catholic Scholars such as Raymond Brown, John Meier, and a well-respected man by the name of James Dunn.