

Sermon for the Festival of Saint Peter and Saint Paul the Apostles

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from Jesus Christ, His Son, our Savior. Amen.

On a Festival Day dedicated to the memory of those two apostolic saints, Sts. Peter and Paul, it may seem odd at first that the lections do not contain a direct account of the life and ministry of St. Paul in particular. But I believe that the simple reason for this is found in the Gospel lection, where Peter speaks for the entirety of the apostles. As our Lutheran Confessions declare:

... Peter is the representative of the entire assembly of apostles, as appears from the text itself. For Christ asks not Peter alone, but says: "Whom do ye say that I am?" And what is here said in the singular number: "I will give unto thee the keys; and whatsoever thou shalt bind," etc., is elsewhere expressed in the plural (Matt. 18:18): "Whatsoever sins ye remit," etc. And in John 20:23: "Whosoever sins ye remit," etc. These words testify that the keys are given alike to all the apostles, and that all the apostles are alike sent forth. (Tractate §23)

Again, our Confessions teach:

As to the declaration: "Upon this rock I will build My Church," certainly the Church has not been built upon the authority of man, but upon the ministry of the confession which Peter made, in which he proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He accordingly addresses him as a minister: "Upon this rock," i.e. upon this ministry. Therefore He addresses him as a minister of such an office as is to be pervaded by this confession and doctrine, and says: "Upon this rock," i.e. this declaration and ministry. (Tractate §25)

Thus the confession and ministry set forth in the Gospel lection are common to all the apostles, and to that which continues in the apostolic ministry to this day. And these two apostles shared in the ministry which is also described in the Gospel for the Second Sunday after Trinity, which is also observed on this day, in which we read in Luke 14 of that master who gave a great supper and sent forth his servant with the instruction, "*Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.*" The act of Herod in murdering the apostle St. James—an act which pleased the Jews—further demonstrate why others are now invited from the highways and hedges. And Sts. Peter and Paul were most prominent in that apostolic generation, extending the Lord's gracious invitation.

As the book of Acts teaches by its emphasis on the ministries of Peter and Paul, these two men should be considered, in a certain sense, the center of the New Testament ministry. The Gospel which they—together with the rest of the apostles—proclaim is one which was revealed by the Lord, not discovered through the reasoning of men. For Saul, this revelation came on the road to Damascus, as Jesus spoke to him. The apostolic ministry is that which Christ Jesus established upon His Word through His call.

After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus declared to St. Peter in John 21: "*Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.*" (v. 18) And St. John then declared: "*This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me.'*" (v. 19)

After Herod slew St. James Scripture tells that the wicked king also seized Peter because his murder of James "*pleased the Jews...*" This persecution of the Church included the

first martyrdom of an apostle, and was carried out for the sake of Herod standing in public opinion. Persecution of the true Church will always be popular with the world; if the world praises you as a Christian, you may rightly wonder how your words and actions have somehow been lacking that such accolades are possible. As for the ways of the world, we know that Herod believe in himself—his power, his authority. Like demagogues in every age, he saw he could buy public support by persecuting those who were ‘different’ and Satan spurred him on to afflict the Church.

As Peter was bound in chains, he must have thought of those words which the Lord had spoken to him: “... *you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.*” He probably believed that the time had come for him to join St. James and seal his confession with his own death. James, after all, was also part of that ‘inner circle’ of three—Peter, James and John—who were with our Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration, and were nearest to Jesus during the anguish of Gethsemane.

St. Peter wrote in the third chapter of his first Epistle: “*But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.*” Peter certainly knew what it was to suffer threats and violence for the sake of the good confession, but by the grace of God he endured.

St. Paul, too, was one who became accustomed to suffering for the sake of Christ. As he wrote to the Corinthians in his second Epistle: “*Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.*” (v. 24–28)

Not long before Peter was seized by Herod, Paul was in Antioch, having been brought there from Tarsus by Barnabas. Thus we read, “*So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*” (Acts 11:26) When it was revealed by prophecy that there would be a great famine, the disciples in Antioch took up a collection for the relief of the brethren in Judea, and sent it by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Thus Barnabas and Saul were apparently among those saints who prayed for Peter in his chains—“... *constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church,*” as we have heard in Acts 12. It was following Peter’s release, and Herod’s death because the angel of the Lord struck Herod for his blasphemy, that Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch. It is fascinating to think of these two men in Jerusalem at that time—Barnabas and Saul came to Jerusalem for the relief of the saints, but surely they had not imagined that would include prayer on behalf of an apostle in chains!

It is good for us to remember that we do not see the end of all things set before us. Paul and Barnabas had come to Jerusalem for one good work, but clearly the Lord made use of their presence for another great good for the Church.

When the angel was sent by God to free Peter, Peter believed it was a vision, and not really happening. When Peter came to the house where the faithful were gathered for prayer, they did not believe it was Peter, thinking it was his angel. Our faith is often weak, but the Lord hears the prayers of His people and will answer. Peter could not be slain before the time appointed for His martyrdom. The gates of Hades shall not prevail against the Church which the Lord Jesus builds.

The angel struck Herod, and slew him for not giving glory to God. The angel struck Peter’s side, and the apostle was freed from his chains to glorify God.

The angel freed Peter from the chains of the flesh, but the keys given to Peter, Paul and the rest of the ministry free from the chains of sin. It is the calling of the ministers of Christ Church to speak the Word of God as a voice from heaven, declaring pardon and peace as the Lord commands—and also binding of sin upon the impenitent. The Lord Jesus declared, *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* So it is: no one should imagine that the judgment spoken against their impenitence is “no big deal,” or “just the pastor’s opinion”—Christ’s servant speaks the divine word. Thus, as well, where the absolution is proclaimed, those who believe receive the forgiveness of their sins, for Christ’s sake. Jesus bore the sins of Peter, Paul and all the world in His own body upon the cross, so that all who believe in Him would be forgiven, justified, before God. The blood of Jesus Christ avails for all who trust in Him. The ministry serves Christ, who redeemed us through His death and resurrection. The Lord who delivered Peter from the hand of Herod is the same Lord who delivered us from the devil’s kingdom by washing away our sins through Holy Baptism. It is He who strengthens and sustains His people, and will come again in glory at the end of the age. Then will be fulfilled all which He has promised, and we will enter into the joy of our Lord forever. Amen.