

## Sermon at St Paul's-outside-the-Walls Papal Basilica, June 26 2015, the Feast of St Peter and St Paul.

It is a great privilege to be here this evening and to be asked to share a short homily on this feast day of St Peter and St Paul. I have enjoyed the very kind hospitality of His Eminence Cardinal Harvey and Abbot Edmund Power on a number of occasions here in this ancient and venerable place. The huge Week of Prayer for Christian Unity liturgy here has twice now been a source of great beauty and hope, in the presence of His Holiness Pope Francis. At the Anglican Centre in Rome we use often the Pope's grace-filled words from these occasions.



Anglicans do feel at home here also because of the extraordinary moment when Pope Paul VI gave Michael Ramsey the Archbishop of Canterbury his episcopal ring here in 1966, at the great doors of this Papal Basilica.

At his first official visit to Pope Francis, Archbishop Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, and *primus inter pares* of the Anglican Communion said:

*Having for many years found inspiration in the great corpus of Catholic social teaching, and worked on its implications with Catholic groups; having spent retreats in new orders of the Church in France, and being accompanied by the Prior of another new order, I do indeed feel that I am (in the words of Pope Paul VI to Archbishop Michael) coming to a place where I can feel myself at home.*

*Your Holiness, we are called by the Holy Spirit of God, through our fraternal love, to continue the work that has been the precious gift to popes and archbishops of Canterbury for these past fifty years, and of which this famous ring is the enduring token. I pray that the nearness of our two inaugurations may serve the reconciliation of the world and the Church.*

Anglicans also feel at home here in this monastic foundation because of the enduring presence of the principles of Benedictine morning and evening prayer in Anglican prayer books throughout the world, a tradition which survived the English reformation intact.

It is privilege also to be here at the tomb of St Paul

On many pilgrimages here, each time I experience the overpowering effect of this remarkable Basilica and twice now I have been greatly blessed by the arrival of a singing procession, accompanied by guitar, moving slowly towards the tomb of St Paul, with their eyes captivated by this vision of Christ over all in the apse roof above us.

Like the mosaic in the apse, Paul's words in Ephesians this evening witness to Christ as the head of a cosmic body the Church, ushering in a universal reign. The exaltation of Christ in the heavenly realms brings the entire creation into unity under Christ

The knowledge of God's will unites all things in Christ, in whose being and mission we are blessed, adopted and redeemed as disciples. Christ is the one who represents God's cosmic rule: the baby worshipped by gentiles, mocked at his crucifixion as king of the Jews, has assumed the throne and begun to reign. The lonely Son of Man has been enthroned as exalted Son of God, whose resurrection was not only his vindication but also his enthronement.

Before any of the vast and infinite mystery of the universe existed, God's plan encompassed the human story of faith. Somehow the universe is ordered so that all things return to God in Christ. This is already unrolled from its hiding place in God's eternal wisdom. This is the mission of the Body of Christ. The specific engineering is not provided; however the source of the fuel is : we feel a call

We are called in a vision of God who encompasses the whole cosmos and who is active in all creation through a Great Commission in tonight's gospel reading from Matthew, through baptism as disciples into the love-field of the Holy Trinity

The baptised community, the inheritors of this Great Commission, the Church, is therefore to be a universal, inclusive community of all nations. This was a message to Peter, the rock of the first Christian community and to the people with him. Paul says in another part of the epistle we read from tonight

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."*

*Ephesians 4:3-6*

So this love-field of the Holy Trinity gathers us into its life and offers us this transformation of our lives with each other: but above all the love-field of the Trinity is an ever increasing, ever outpouring creative energy of righteousness and justice. God cannot do other than constantly reach out to the margins, the wounds and the forgotten places of the world with compassion and solidarity.

We are called and drawn into this mission with all the passion of God for all of creation, and particularly where woundedness and oppression run deep. It is here that God seeks to restore and transform most of all. God has a bias for the poor, through their liberation and restoration.

This process of liberation and restoration in and through the love-field of the Trinity involves "suffering alongside" another which is at the heart of the Incarnation and which we call 'compassion'. This is where the whole creation is groaning and travailing, waiting for the glorious freedom of the children of God, of the new creation to be born. We are therefore involved in the labour pains of a new creation. How do we live with this, what sense do we make of it?

This compassion shows the possibility of what it is like to be someone else, as the three persons of the Trinity "know". It is the basis of all sympathy, empathy and compassion. Because of the revelation of God in Christ, we know that other people are as alive as we are and are created and loved as we are. To be Christian is to know that you are loved to the core of your being, so is your neighbour, and so are your enemies. Cruelty to others is a failure of this Christian imagination.

In an interview a few days after the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11, the journalist Ian McEwan said:

*If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed....Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and the beginning of morality.*

Only human beings have the power to imagine a future that could be different from the present. Only we can begin to imagine what it might be like to be someone else, including those from whom we are divided.

We can begin by practising this sacred imagination on one another for a holy reason, as Christians who know division, who passionately desire reconciliation and a restored unity and peace that the world cannot give. The reality of our divisions can be turned around to serve the sacred mission which is entrusted to us in the Great Commission, by witnessing to the divided world, the bridges we are building over our schisms and disagreements, and by holding each other in love and respect when at times we still don't agree on everything. This is a witness the world desperately needs today.

This witness must have been true for Peter and Paul whose feast we commemorate this evening. The New Testament hints at a profound contrast between them. They were so different, and imagining each other's realities would have been a serious and perhaps seemingly impossible challenge. Paul the Tarsus Pharisee, the prolific writer, the entrepreneur over all the Mediterranean, whose mind became a fountain head of so much of what we now think of Christ, his kingdom and his mission. Peter the newly hewn rock, the big fisherman, the first bishop of Rome, whose rough and ready faith was hammered out in the fire of his rejection of Christ and his ultimate allegiance as the first of the Popes pictured here to my left.

Peter knew Jesus in the flesh, and Paul didn't, but Paul was powerfully blinded and then enlightened by the light of Christ crucified and risen, a scene so powerfully portrayed in an extraordinary painting here to my right.

Peter and Paul: two mentalities, so different, and yet bound by the same universal vision and transforming grace. Their unity was not uniformity, but a creative tension, a force-field created by their north and their south poles of radically different spirituality. Yet with one of them gone off in enmity, the mission field of the first century Mediterranean would have collapsed.

Their difference, held together by the same mission and the same discipleship, was partly what created the variety of energies that drove them on, and partly what produced the scope and the balance between the strategies of the first bishop and the first apostle to the gentiles.

Peter and Paul can help us now and become our hope as models of unity in the face of great diversity. There is a well-known icon showing Peter and Paul embracing exchanging a holy kiss of peace and reconciliation. Peter and Paul ended their days here in Rome, dying for the same cause for which Jesus gave his life and blood.

There are the two great statues behind us here, where Peter and Paul stand side by side, welcoming the whole world to this sanctuary and this vision of the universal Christ above us, who is above all and in all and through all, in whom we live and move and have our being.

*Eternal one, Ancient of days, Wellspring of Life, We seek you in this place who fills all places, We call you by these names, whose name is above every name. We pray with these words, who prays in us with sighs too deep for words*

*Come to us in our limitations, sufferings and longing, O love incarnate, O limitless good, O fountain of justice.*

*Make us yours, make us whole, make us one, more and more.”*

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