

## APOSTLES IN COMMON<sup>1</sup>

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Evensong on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 25 June 2017, being a celebration of the Feast Day of St Peter and St Paul



The Apostles Peter and Paul

Given their importance in the history of Christianity, you might imagine that Peter and Paul would each have his own feast day. Instead, they share the one feast, 29 June. In a broadcast on Vatican Radio, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane notes that, in Rome, the two are always associated.<sup>2</sup> A fifth century hymn, “Decora lux aeternitas, aureum” gives us a clue to why. A translation of the hymn is found in the New English Hymnal (No. 171), but this version, by Monsignor Ronald Knox, better expresses the significance attributed to the two saints together:

What fairer light is this than time itself doth own,  
The golden day with beams more radiant brightening?  
The princes of God's Church this feast day doth enthrone,  
To sinners heavenward bound their burden lightening.

One taught mankind its creed, one guards the heavenly gate,  
Founders of Rome, they bind the world in loyalty;  
One by the sword achieved, one by the cross his fate;  
With laurelled brows they hold eternal royalty.

Rejoice O Rome, this day; thy walls they once did sign  
With princely blood, who now their glory share with thee.  
What city's vesture glows with crimson deep as thine?  
What beauty else has earth that may compare with thee?

To God the three in one eternal homage be,  
All honour, all renown, all songs victorious,  
Who rules both heaven and earth by one divine decree

<sup>1</sup> Readings: Acts 12:1-11; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/29/why\\_celebrate\\_saints\\_peter\\_and\\_paul\\_on\\_the\\_same\\_day/1154766](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/29/why_celebrate_saints_peter_and_paul_on_the_same_day/1154766)

To everlasting years in empire glorious.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from praising the individual contributions of the two saints, this hymn makes two other important points. The first is the tradition that the two saints were both martyred in Rome under the persecution of Emperor Nero. I say tradition because, while Paul was clearly in Rome when he died, the whereabouts of Peter are less certain.<sup>4</sup> In the tradition, Paul, a Roman citizen, had the privilege of being beheaded, hence the sword as his symbol. Peter, the Jew, was crucified, as tradition has it, upside down because he would not be compared with Jesus. Thus, in addition to keys, Peter's symbol is a reversed cross. There is a tradition that they were executed on the same day, but this is most certainly false.

In calling them "Founders of Rome", the hymn makes an allusion to Romulus and Remus, the traditional twin founders of the city, and suggests that a new Rome has arisen, that is, the church. Peter is placed as the leader, Paul as the teacher; bishop versus theologian.

Despite all the excessive praise, the relationships between Peter and Paul were far from harmonious. In chapter 2 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul sets out the history of his relationships with Peter, telling how he opposed his overly Jewish approach to the gospel. It seems that, in Galatia, as also in Corinth, different groups adhered to Peter or to Paul, with the Petrine group being the Jewish membership of the church. The gist of the argument can be seen in this quotation from Galatians:

But when Cephas [Greek for Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

As New Testament scholar, Ian Elmer, notes it seems that Peter was easily influenced by James, the brother of Jesus, who was the principal leader of the church in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> We don't have any comments from Peter about Paul. The authorship of the two New Testament letters attributed to Peter is strongly contested by scholars and, in any case, they don't mention Paul at all.<sup>6</sup> But the content of the argument that they had is clear. Did Gentiles who wished to become Christians first need to become Jews? To put it another way, was Christianity destined to be a sect of Judaism? It does not follow, even so, that Judaism would have accepted the Christians, even had they wished to remain. Without Paul, the ultimate decision would have been very different. This conflict is a powerful reason not to separate the two apostles.

This conflict was also about the future of the church. Had the conservative approach prevailed, Christianity would have disappeared into Judaism to last as long as that faith tolerated it, which might have been a very short time indeed. Because Paul prevailed, we are now part of the church. We also know that the question of who is in and who is out persists to this day, although with different subjects for the debate.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.texasnuns.com/2013/06/29/what-fairer-light/>

<sup>4</sup> Ian Elmer, [http://www.catholica.com.au/ianstake1/065\\_it\\_171107.php](http://www.catholica.com.au/ianstake1/065_it_171107.php)

<sup>5</sup> Elmer.

<sup>6</sup> See also, <http://vatican2voice.org/4basics/paulpeter.htm>

Also still prevalent is the tension between tradition and adaptation. Ian Elmer, whom I have already quoted, is a Roman Catholic scholar and he says:

Reading through these early battles I can't help but think how much Peter sounds a lot like most bishops today, caught between warring factions who each want to claim allegiance to "tradition" via the magisterium represented by the "apostle". It is astonishing how little has changed in 2000 years. Every time I read Galatians, 1 Corinthians and Romans, I think of the many good bishops, priests and the Pope who must always try to walk the razor's edge without getting shredded. In this sense, Peter is the model of the episcopate and the papacy.<sup>7</sup>

Anglicans, who have neither a magisterium nor a pope, can still recognise the debate to which Elmer refers. Neither should we imagine that the new should always be victorious. We live in a world that challenges values that were embedded in Judaism and inherited by Christianity. I refer, for example, to the concept of persons being made in the image of God, from which we derive our commitment to the value of each human being. I refer to the commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The tension between Peter and Paul is not an observation about an episode in our history, it is an experience that we must embrace if we are to continue to be the church in the world. That is why we should still celebrate these two saints together.

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<sup>7</sup> Elmer.