

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	29 June 2025
Service:	Eucharist, St Peter and St Paul
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

St Peter and St Paul, whom we celebrate today, are perhaps the two most influential people in the whole history of the Church. Tradition has it that Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome on 29 June in the year 67, hence their joint feast day at this time of year. But whilst they may have died on the same day, but in many ways they could not have been more different.

Peter was the first of the twelve disciples whom Jesus called to follow him, and was with Jesus throughout his ministry as he went around the Galilee region teaching and healing. Peter was almost always by Jesus's side right up to his crucifixion and beyond.

Paul, on the other hand, came on to the scene relatively late. Paul, or Saul, as he had previously been called had not known Jesus before the resurrection, never heard him teach. We first hear of him in the New Testament as an enemy of the newly founded Christian movement. But one day, as Saul travelled on the road to Damascus, he had an experience that turned his life upside down. For there, blinded by a dazzling light, he heard Christ ask him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' and from that moment he was converted.

Different also was the way these two saw their role in life; their vocation; what God wanted them to do. Peter, like the other original disciples was one of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem: the holy city of the Jewish people. Like other Jews, Peter would not necessarily have expected, especially at the beginning, that Christianity would spread outside Judaism, but rather that it would be a sect within it, a bit like some of the other Jewish sects that we can read about in the New Testament such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees or the Essenes living in the caves at Qumran.

Paul, on the other hand, was motivated by a much wider vision. He was perhaps the first to understand that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the

Messiah ushered in a new age in which, as predicted by the prophets, God would bring the gentiles (in other words, the non-Jews) into his Kingdom. Therefore, as he saw it, the good news of Jesus Christ must be brought to gentiles as well as Jews. So Paul travelled extensively around the Roman Empire, founding churches in different areas of the Roman world such as Corinth and Philippi in what is now Greece, Galatia and Ephesus in what is now Turkey, and in Rome. Later, he would write letters back to the churches he had founded: hence his letters that we have in the New Testament.

I was recently given this small round icon which depicts Peter and Paul embracing one another. It is moving to look at, but in all likelihood, their divergent visions meant that they did not get on very well together. They had at least one serious row when Peter suggested that the gentile Christians, whom Paul had converted should start to live like Jews, keeping Jewish laws about food and male circumcision. A furious row ensued: 'when Peter came to Antioch,' writes Paul in the letter to the Galatians 'I opposed him to his face'.

And finally, Peter and Paul were in all probability very different personalities. In today's gospel, Peter has a moment of very great clarity when at Caesarea Philippi, he clearly identifies who Jesus is: you are the Christ, the son of the living God'. On the basis of this confession of faith, Jesus describes Peter as the rock on which he will build the Church. But although he is clear at this key moment, the gospels often present Peter as somebody who characteristically gets things wrong. Sometimes, as at the transfiguration, he spoke when he should have been listening. And sometimes he was silent when he should have spoken. Supremely, when the time came to defend Jesus, during his trial, Peter, having stoutly said that he would never betray him, denied three times that he even knew Jesus. He seems in some ways a very human figure: sometimes weak and indecisive, often making mistakes, frequently unsure of himself.

Paul, on the other hand, seems to have been possessed of a very high level of confidence in what he did. Clear-sighted and decisive, if he had not been so confident he could never have accomplished his extraordinary mission of bringing the gospel of Christ around the Roman world and of having the extraordinary impact he did. Although, there was perhaps some personal cost to this extraordinary determination. In one of the most moving passages of Paul's letters he confesses to having had a 'thorn in the flesh': we do not know what this was – perhaps some ailment or habit or a particular individual – whose presence in his life had reminded him that it is not so much in our successes but in our weaknesses and failures, that we most fully know God's grace and God's strength.

Peter and Paul show us, then, something about how God makes us both diverse and yet united. Radically different in their background, outlook and personality, and yet both called to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and both called to make the gospel of his saving love known to others. Both called eventually to suffer and be martyred for Christ and, ironically given the differences between them, to die for their faith on the same day.

So, right at the very start of the life of the Church, we see that it is made of people with different skills, personalities, outlooks and aptitudes. Not everyone could or should be like one another, not everyone is called to do the same thing. We are like the players of different instruments in an orchestra, singers of different parts in a choir or, to use Paul's own favourite image, like different parts of the body each with different roles and different strengths.

But, as God did with these two very different figures right at the beginning of the Church's life, so he can and will use our various different aptitudes for his purposes and for the building up of his people, if we are able to be open to his purposes and receptive to his call. Indeed as in their different ways Peter and Paul both remind us, he can even use our failures and our weaknesses if these too we can open up to his healing, his transformation and his grace.