

29th June 2025, Choral Eucharist

Acts 12:1-11, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18 and Matthew 16; 13-19

Mother Emma

Today is the Feast of St Peter and St Paul. As we give thanks for them, many clergy are also marking the anniversary of our ordinations as this weekend, following a long tradition of Pentecost ordinations, up and down the country, people are being made into priest or deacon to serve in God's church and to follow the examples of Peter and Paul. These famous saints were the two acknowledged leaders of the early Church, both believed to have been martyred for their faith in Rome on this day in around the year 64AD. They would play a vital role in leading Christ's followers: Peter initially by witnessing to the Lordship of Christ, and Paul in developing an understanding of this Lordship for Christ's followers across the world. Scripture records moments when each of them spoke out with the boldness which would both draw thousands to proclaim Jesus as Lord and would ultimately lead to their martyrdom. Peter in our Gospel passage declared, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

Only a couple of weeks ago, we heard the inspiring passages from Acts on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, and Peter led them in speaking to the crowds of Christ's Crucifixion, but announcing, *"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses."* Paul, meanwhile, writes in the second letter to Timothy (our Epistle reading), *"The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it."* Both witness and proclamation continue to lie at the heart of leadership in the church today.

Peter and Paul did not always agree – Paul's staunch support for his Gentile converts sometimes put him at odds with the Early Church leadership in Jerusalem, who wanted to insist that all converts also followed Jewish law, including circumcision and food prohibitions. However, there is no doubt that with their different characters and backgrounds – Peter as a humble Galilean fisherman, who had actually spent three years in the company of the earthly Jesus, and Paul, a trained and academic Pharisee, converted by an extraordinary encounter with the risen Christ – they offered a wide range of different life experiences and perspectives from which they viewed the world and reached out to others.

Although they may have been the first leaders of the church, Christ continues to call people day by day to serve in his church in many different ways and from many different backgrounds, across class, race, education, nationality and personality. During the Ordination Service, the Bishop lays hands upon the candidate and anoints them, praying: *"We praise and glorify you, almighty Father, because in your infinite love you have formed throughout the world a holy people for your own possession, a royal priesthood, a universal Church."* Each one of us is called to serve in this universal priesthood, by making Christ's story known in the world, and reflecting God's love for his people. We may protest that we are not equipped, physically, emotionally or spiritually to serve God to the full. But I have known

people who overcome barriers of all kinds to be ordained, or to serve in a particular way as a layperson in the church, alongside their regular job.

We are told that St Paul had what he euphemistically refers to as "*a thorn in the flesh*", which some have speculated may have been epilepsy or a similar condition. Many leading Christian figures have been tested through ill health, relationship breakdown, tragedy or loss. None would claim a saintly character either, and the stories of Peter and Paul as the backdrop for ordination offer a welcome reminder that even those two great figures of the Christian Church were far from perfect. Peter denied Christ three times on the eve of the Crucifixion, only hours after swearing to die with him. During his three years of following Jesus, he continually blurts out things for which Jesus rebukes him; he tries and fails to walk on water, he declares that Jesus should not suffer and die, earning himself the tough reproach, "*Get behind me, Satan.*" Yet he is given not only the chance to redeem himself, by declaring three times that he truly loves the risen Christ, but is commissioned to lead God's church on earth, and to hold the keys of heaven.

Paul's story began as a vicious persecutor of the new Christian faith, who was also given a second chance by his vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and turned his mind to working just as hard for the Gospel as he had previously worked against it. However ill-equipped we may feel to serve God, whether as laypeople or ordained ministers, there is always the reminder that we follow in the steps of those who have been called despite physical challenges or character weaknesses. There is something in God's call from which we cannot turn away, something which draws us on to follow him, to confess him before others, and to praise him and share his story.

At the start of this month, twenty-six candidates from this church were confirmed by the Bishop. At this service, too, the Bishop laid hands on the candidates, saying to each one, "*God has called you by name and made you his own. Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit.*" Every one of us who has been confirmed, has, like priests and deacons, proclaimed our own faith, and received the Holy Spirit through the Bishop's prayer, commissioning us for our own, individual calling. If you wonder if God is calling you to any kind of ministry in his church (this might include not only wondering about ordination, but lay ministries such as reading, serving, welcoming, providing refreshments, joining the PCC or one of its committees), please do come and speak to one of the clergy as you work to discern what that calling might be.

As we remember St Peter and St Paul today, may we pray earnestly for the newly ordained, the newly confirmed, and above all, for ourselves, that we may hear whatever God is calling us to do, and respond with all our hearts to that call.