

4 years ago on the feast of SS Peter and Paul I climbed the very ornate Bishop Launcelot Andrews pulpit at St Peter's church Bishops Waltham to deliver a farewell sermon. The following week I was to be admitted to the Diaconate and to join you here to serve my title curacy. Almost exactly a year later I was ordained priest.

Next year I will climb the stairs to the imposing pulpit at the Chapel of the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich on my first patronal festival as Chaplain there.

Today, here I am, in the pulpit of St Faith Havant, offering my final sermon as curate, at the end of a very full, rich, testing but joyous 4 years with you.

Petertide, as this time in the church's calendar is known, has become for me a time of transition and reflection, of knowing God's faithfulness and marvelling at God's faith in me.

But I want this morning to say not just a few words about my curacy here but also about St Peter and St Paul whom we commemorate today.

At first glance the Fisherman and the Pharisee, the one brought up to an in depth knowledge of the sea and the weather and where the fish might be and the other who studied the Jewish law and knew it intimately and lived according to each and every rule, do not have much in common. Each made their different mark on the early church and their legacy of active faith is handed down to us today. They are commemorated together because it is regarded as the anniversary of their martyrdom in about the year 64.

Before I started training for ordination I have to admit that St Paul and his writings was something that I struggled with. He seemed arrogant

and opinionated and the publicity that views attributed to him about women and same sex relationships, were enough to make this liberal catholic woman more than slightly resistant to him.

When we read the letters of Paul we're never quite sure what questions or behaviours he is responding to. We need some insight into the world in which he lived; particularly the place of women in ancient society and the part that sex played in some pagan religious practices and roman society. There's a whole sermon series or two in Paul and his writings but I want to commend further study to you.

Over the years I have come to have a great affection for St Paul. As a well-educated Greek and Roman citizen he writes in the correct and formal style of his day. He is the classic "poacher turned gamekeeper". A zealous persecutor of followers of the way of Christ until his own encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, thereafter a zealous follower of the way himself; preacher, teacher and exhorter, an indefatigable planter of churches and writer of letters. A deep thinker from whom we have received so much; whose thoughts on the nature of God and what it means to live the Christian life have become a part of our Christian DNA. Paul suffered much, as did Peter, and he gave us much.

Whatever you think about Paul, the translations of his letters have given us some of the most profound passages in the bible. Whatever the issues he addresses in his writings, he is clear about one thing; God loves us, each of us, deeply, endlessly and freely.

To quote from that famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This is the love of God that St Paul wrote about and which we are called in our own poor way to reflect.

St Peter knew that God loved him. He experienced this daily as he lived with and followed Jesus; he saw it in the healing miracles, the compassion for those in need, and the forgiveness and understanding that he himself received.

Unlike Paul, Peter probably had no formal education and you could say that he was plucked from obscurity (well from a fishing boat and nets on the shores of the Sea of Galilee) to be a foremost disciple of Jesus.

There are many stories of Peter in the gospels;

Peter getting out of the boat and walking on the water as he saw Jesus do and then realising what he is doing, sinking as he looks at his feet instead of Jesus.

Peter not understanding the significance of going up the mountain with Jesus and seeing him transfigured (made luminous by God) and seeing Moses and Elijah and wanting to build them shelters.

Peter denying that he knows Jesus after his arrest but still feeling that he needs to follow his friend and teacher, albeit clandestinely.

Peter at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning.

Peter hiding with the other disciples.

And later in Acts, Peter filled with the holy spirit bringing others to faith in the living God and leading the early church; and our reading today of Peter being delivered from a prison where he was almost certainly to be put to death for his faith.

In the years that he walks alongside Jesus, Peter comes to a deep realisation of who Jesus is “The Messiah, the son of the living God” and for this profession of the truth Peter, Simon Peter becomes the

one called Cephas, the Rock, the secure foundation on which the church is built.

Peter gets it wrong, he doesn't understand, he hides, he lies, he acts on impulse but God chooses this flawed and impetuous individual to be the founder of the church. Peter is you and Peter is me, a very real and imperfect human being.

Peter and Paul each in their way inspired others and continue to inspire others to build the church. What they knew and what God asks is that the church is a community built upon the sure foundation of the love of God as revealed in his son Jesus.

Whatever else the church is, it must first and foremost be a community of love where we each recognise our own failings and love others for theirs, and we do this because God first loves us.

We, each one of us, are the rocks on which the church is built. However beautiful a church building is unless it houses a community, a family where each is known and loved, it might as well be empty.

Someone once told me that it is the duty of a curate to be loved. If so, I have done my duty for I have been well loved. These past four years have had their ups and downs but we have endeavoured to love each other and support each other and continue to build this church.

For my part I give thanks for all your love and support as I have grown and been a member of this church and community. It has been such a privilege to live and work amongst you all. In some way I take you with me.

I will not embarrass anyone by singling them out by name except to pay tribute to Peter Jones in his absence for his patience and generosity as my training incumbent for two and three quarter years.

I remind us of some of the words from our reading from 2 Timothy:

“As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation and the time of my departure has come. The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, to him be the glory for ever and ever.”

My time here as curate is ended and God has called me to Greenwich. God has been with me and will be with me. To Him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen