

St. Peter and St. Paul – 26<sup>th</sup> June 16

Readings: Acts 9: 1-22; Psalm 34; 2 Timothy 4: 6-18; Luke 24: 44-48

Today is the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, so we give thanks to God for St. Paul for whom this church is named. As we do this, I want to say a few words on the second reading from the Letter to Timothy. This will not be a long reflection as it is being translated, so I need to allow time for that.

Paul is in prison in Rome and maybe these are his last words. We don't know for sure, but it is clear that he knows the time of his departure has come. From that moment on the Road to Damascus until now, Paul has been faithful. In 2 Corinthians he lists all kinds of hardship he has suffered – prison, beatings, stoning, shipwreck, bandits, sleepless nights, cold, hunger, thirst to name some. But in all of this he has refused to give away the central truth of the gospel he was called to proclaim. He is not being stubborn, but he is clear that faith should not be given up to those who want to use it to get their own way and turn it into a competition for spiritual power. He says the Lord has given him strength so that the message might be fully proclaimed so all the Gentiles might hear it.

We can see from our reading that Paul is alone in prison. He feels this deeply. Even those who he thought would help him have deserted him. But even in his loneliness, his feelings of being let down, there is hope. He dares to believe that in the end God is still in control and he need not fear anything. He realizes that not everything can be sorted out. When we feel things are out of control, we naturally want to fix things.

But some things in the world around us are out of our control. Terrible things can happen.

Early in my time here, I had a discussion with The Rev'd. Peter Mayen. I remember him saying to me that he had seen terrible things – and I'm sure many of our Sudanese brothers and sisters have seen terrible things – and he said that there were some things that just can't be fixed. That is not surrendering, but it can be an expression of faith that we do not have to fix everything – and we cannot. It is OK to acknowledge our human limitations. It is about faith – recognising that in all the distress and pain, God is still there. It is certainly about God's grace. The last words in this letter are "Grace be with you." It is OK to say with Paul that we have run our race, and Paul often used the image of a race to describe our Christian journey. Heading to the end of his race, exhausted, at least reaching the end of his ministry, Paul has a sense of peace. He is letting go.

We know that Paul was executed in Rome. Can we imagine what it was like? Rome then was cruel and callous. There was no interest in or time to listen to another's point of view. Like all cruel regimes, they wanted anyone who was different out of the way. It didn't matter how they did it. Many Christians today, especially in Africa face such persecution. Yet we know that they remain faithful as Paul did – and we have many with us this morning as living examples those who have remained faithful and of Paul's proclamation that the gospel was for all.

Here in the letter is a picture of Paul still grasping hopefully at opportunities to spread the word of goodness and grace among the Gentiles, even as he is in great danger. Under pressure the Christian community around Paul has collapsed, but alongside his hurt and disappointment he is at peace.

So Paul is an inspiration for us all, a mirror in which to see our own experience. There is a challenge to remain faithful to God, stay on course to the end and somehow also to find the peace that comes from knowing we have tried our hardest to do the best we can, without thinking we always have to be successful and hold everything together.

As a community of faith which bears the name of St. Paul, let us pray that God will give us grace to value the gifts God has given us, to remain faithful, to stay the course, to run the race to the very best of our ability, and in all things to look to God the author and giver of all good gifts. Paul would write to the Colossians (Colossians 3: 12-14). "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Those words are for us, too.