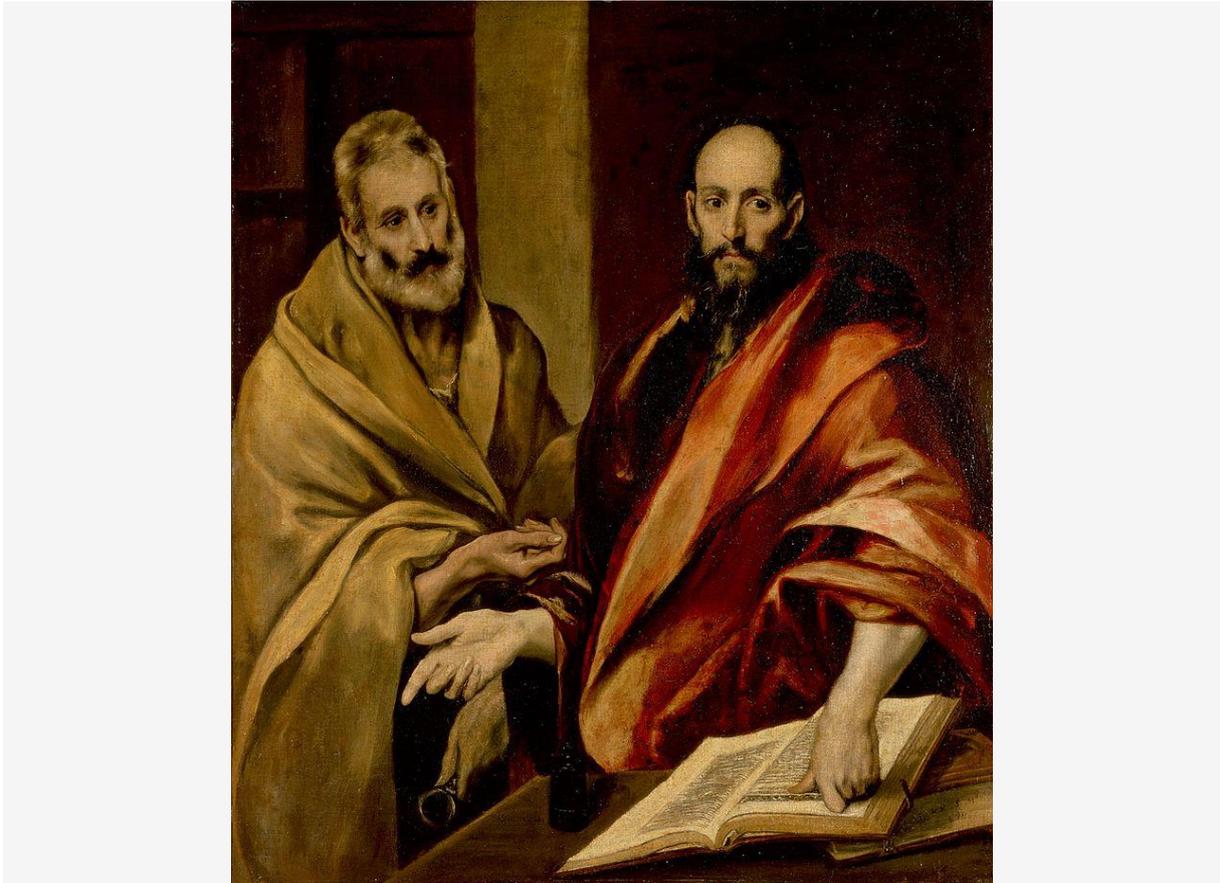


## Some words for the Feast of St Peter & St Paul

*'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.'*<sup>1</sup>



### Readings:

*Acts 12:1-11*

*2 Timothy 4:6-8. 17-18*

*Psalm 33:2-9 R.v.5*

*Matthew 16:13-19*

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Historically speaking, the numbers of the peacetime British Army have always been small. As an island bastion that was protected by the Royal Navy for over three centuries there was no need to maintain and pay for a large standing army. The age of aircraft and missiles saw the beginnings of change in Britain's defence needs and, as we move through the nuclear age into one that will see continuing developments in cyber-, micro- and tech-warfare, it remains unlikely that

there will be a significant enlargement in the future peacetime force of professional soldiers. The number of current trained combat troops in the British Army would not fill Wembley Stadium. What this has meant in practice is that the peacetime army has acted as the skeleton upon which a larger body has been grown during time of war. A frequently repeated pattern over the centuries therefore, has been that the rapid expansion of the army at war has had to be quickly accompanied by a host of sackings and promotions. From junior leaders all the way up to senior generals, the harsh realities of violent conflict soon revealed who had exceeded expectations and who had failed to perform.

My own love of history was ignited by my introduction to the Romans at primary school, and by early adolescence I had developed a taste for military history also. The mask of command, to use the noted historian Sir John Keegan's phrase, has continued to fascinate me, as generalship, the skill and practice of exercising military command, ruthlessly lays bare the physical, intellectual and moral capacity of a person like few other roles. Soldiers can spend a whole career in the army and never hear a shot fired in anger but their job remains essentially the same, to prepare for an unwanted moment of violence. For all the continuing developments that have taken place in the formation of future leaders, through staff colleges and military exercises, the true test of such leadership is always subject to the baptism of fire. Hence, while colleges and universities, apprenticeships and business schools, also look to prepare people for a future role or career and to determine who might be fit to exercise some future office, military command remains different. Combat is a cruel and unforgiving arena and it immediately exposes inadequate leadership, often fatally so, especially for those under command.

There is a long tradition in Christianity of speaking of spiritual warfare, and both the scriptures and later writers have often employed military metaphors and analogies to better explain or understand the life and mission of faith. St Paul for example spoke of the '*sword of the Spirit,*' the '*breastplate of integrity*' and '*the helmet of salvation,*'<sup>2</sup> and when I was a young boy our Confirmation class was told that the sacrament would make us all soldiers for Christ. I recall my eight-year-old self being quite excited by that. However, it is not the soldierly aspect but the untested nature of military leadership before the first fight that interests me today.

The bow and arrow, the domestication of the horse for cavalry, and gunpowder all brought about revolutions to society through their use in warfare by visionary commanders. So it was that the early Christian leaders, despite being unproven and armed with new and untried weapons, would face the harsh realities

of opposition only to eventually triumph in an unexpected victory that would change the understanding of society itself. Other than their Master, nobody had ever before tried to lead people by turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile or offering the cloak off one's back, to say nothing of being willing to *'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'*<sup>3</sup> Even if you were prepared, as many of the great commanders have been, to lead from the front, you could be forgiven for wondering if anyone might actually be inclined to follow you. How would it work?

Today's feast celebrates two of the greatest champions of our faith, *'the blessed Apostles ... Peter, foremost in confessing the faith, Paul, its outstanding preacher.'*<sup>4</sup> At first glance the impulsive Peter and the disputatious Paul do not appear to possess the necessary qualities for leadership, though I could perhaps easily picture St Peter leading a reckless charge and St Paul beating a stubborn retreat, unwilling to concede defeat. Setting out to preach the risen Christ and to change hearts and minds, these two apostles had no great numbers at their command and they were armed only with poverty and a dedicated obedience to God's will. Self-belief is a hallmark of great leaders, that willingness to trust in one's own judgement at moments of intense criticism, doubt and stress, but it is readiness to rely on belief in God that is the sign of sanctity. That both men were to suffer the grubby fate of execution is not for the Christian a sign of their failure therefore, but an eloquent demonstration of their dedication to the mission of their master. In both cases their martyrdom was but the final manifestation of lives that had both long since been lost to Christ; *'deep in thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me.'*<sup>5</sup> Even the very best commanders have sometimes had to sacrifice lives in order to achieve victory but St Peter and St Paul sacrificed none but their own. As events in a park in Reading last weekend remind us, Christian martyrdom offers witness to the world by the giving of one's own life, not the taking of somebody else's.

The faith of both men continued to grow throughout their lives. Having already witnessed so much that was truly extraordinary, Peter can still nonetheless declare in today's first reading, after being miraculously freed from prison; *'Now I know it is all true.'*<sup>6</sup> You would hardly have thought it possible that he could have had any doubts left by that point in his life, yet refreshingly, he does. This is no saint whose heart and faith are set in stone. He is a man like us who still possesses the capacity to both doubt and grow in faith. Likewise, Paul's journey from zealous persecutor to serene elder statesman, calmly writing his last letter before his death in today's second reading, sees him reflecting on his life and how it has been shaped by the mystery of *'The Lord [who] stood by me and gave me power.'*<sup>7</sup> This power enabled

him to proclaim *'the whole message ... for all the pagans to hear,'*<sup>8</sup> but it was achieved by his preparedness to offer his own life as a libation to God and to fight *'the good fight to the end.'*<sup>9</sup> Both men had been equally blessed in coming to knowledge of the Christ, because it had not been *'flesh and blood that revealed this to [them] but [their] Father in heaven;'*<sup>10</sup> Peter at Caesarea Philippi and Paul on the road to Damascus, and each man had known moments in life when he had *'sought the Lord and he answered me; from all my terrors he set me free.'*<sup>11</sup>

Although they turned out to be saints I have no doubt that, at the time, some would have thought the Lord could have chosen better (something that many of the successors to the office of St Peter have experienced also). Indeed, St Paul had to remind the community at Corinth that he too *'had seen the Lord,'*<sup>12</sup> and if not all bishops are successors to Peter they are all successors to the Apostles (and often subject to the same criticism as the pontiff also). Providence provided that the Roman *imperium* and the benefits of the *Pax Romana* would offer the perfect vehicle for the transmission of the Good News. The relatively secure network of travel by land and sea enabled the early disciples to quickly move across the empire and beyond as they carried the message of Christ to the world. It seems inevitable now that the city of Rome, the central hub of government and communication, would draw our two great champions within her walls. Surely so much of the understanding of the unity and universality of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church took its shape and character from inside the city and empire of Rome? All the local churches founded by the apostles took part in this process of course but, such was the importance of Rome and of the nature of St Peter and St Paul, that their work and their deaths there continue, through the Catholic Church, to give to us something of the distinctive flavour of the first century Mediterranean world in which She was born.

Rather like the military, even today when so much of the training has changed, preparing men in seminary for ordination to the priesthood still faces the challenge of being unable to quite replicate the conditions that will apply after ordination. Following the example of the Lord and the disciples that he shaped, it is the gift of service to Christ and his Church that is the principle means by which the ordinand is nowadays formed. Too often these days we speak of lay ministry, a term that in reality, as it refers to specific tasks, excludes many, while the term lay apostolate which encompasses all, lies largely forgotten. We are all successors to the saints and be it by virtue of ordination or the lay apostolate *'in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life,'*<sup>13</sup> we all have a share in the mission of the Church to *'make Christ*

*known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.'*<sup>14</sup> None of us are truly prepared for the demands that our faith in the Lord might make of us. It is our personal relationship with Jesus that is the essence of all true Christian life, whether it is exercised through towering leadership or in the most modest of everyday tasks. Holiness can be developed and all of us are called to it. Sanctity is not something we possess, it is something we live. The lives of Saints Peter and Paul are among the finest examples of God's grace at work in willing and open hearts - living stones, providing firm and faithful apostolic foundations.

*'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,  
To everlasting years in empire glorious.'*<sup>15</sup>

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us*

St Joseph, *pray for us*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

28 June 2020

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The picture is of *Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, El Greco, 1587-1592, The Hermitage, St Petersburg

1. *Aurea Luce*, verses 1 & 2, 5th century Latin, trans. Mgr. Ronald A. Knox, 1888–1957
2. *Ephesians* 6:14-17
3. *Matthew* 5:43
4. *Preface*, Proper of Saints Peter and Paul, *Roman Missal*
5. *Soul of my Saviour*, verse 2, attributed to Pope John XXII, d.1334, trans. unknown
6. *Acts* 12:11
7. *2 Timothy* 4:17
8. *Ibid.*
9. *2 Timothy* 4:7
10. *Matthew* 16:17
11. *Psalms* 33:5
12. *1 Corinthians* 9:1
13. *Lumen Gentium*, n.4, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Aurea Luce*, verses 3 & 4, *op. cit.*