

Homily: Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, 28th June 2020

I'm hopeful that when I stand here next Sunday, a few of you may also be here in the church with me, as well as those who continue to join us from home. It will be a great joy to gather together again for Mass – we need each other and we need the Lord. That's perhaps one of the reasons why the Church gives us a joint feast day for these two great Apostles, Peter and Paul. They were very different characters and only met a few times in their earthly lives, but together they stand as a sign of our call to be members of the Body of Christ, the Church, all with our different gifts and with our different roles to play.

Over the last couple of weeks it's been really beautiful to see people back in our church, praying privately and silently, but – in a certain sense – praying together before the Lord. One day, soon after we reopened, it was a warm day; there was heavy rain and a thunderstorm raging outside - somehow the whole experience reminded me of praying in Lourdes. The sound of the thunder; the relentless rain; the warm, humid air; the peace of praying before the Lord and accompanied by others in silent prayer. I felt like I was transported to a place of pilgrimage!

I knew that I would enjoy seeing people back in the church at prayer, but one thing I hadn't expected was the simple joy of throwing open the church doors. It is wonderful to have the doors wide open – actually, as we have to have a one-way system and maximum ventilation, all the doors and the windows are open, so there is plenty of air flowing through the building. Having gone for so long with everything locked shut, it seems to me as though God is letting this place breathe again with the prayers of His people.

There's a real sense of doors being flung open by God in today's readings. We hear, of course, in the Gospel of St Peter being given the keys to the kingdom of heaven: ultimately his task is to open the gates of heaven for God's people, to lead us to the Lord. And he can only do this because he has first experienced God's saving and liberating power. In the first reading Peter is freed from prison. Locked up, chained and guarded, he faces death: but God works a miracle for him: his chains fall away, the prison doors are flung open, and he walks freely past the guards.

This event takes place around the time of the Passover – the time that Jesus died and rose from the dead – and it very much reminds me of the resurrection of Jesus. Held captive by death, Jesus was placed in a tomb, which was sealed with a large stone; he was wrapped tightly in a burial shroud and two guards were placed there. But at the resurrection the shroud fell from Him, just as Peter's chains fell from his wrists and ankles; the stone was rolled away from the tomb, just as the prison gates were flung open; the guards fell into a faint, just as Peter's guards seemed powerless to stop him walking free. Peter escapes the death sentence; Jesus escaped death itself. Peter is sharing in His Lord's work, and so He shares in the Lord's victory over death.

St Paul today also speaks of being rescued from death: "The Lord will rescue me from all evil attempts on me, and bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom," Paul writes. In fact, Paul was also miraculously freed from prison, and both Peter and Paul knew the saving power of God. As well as their prison escapes, Paul was saved from shipwreck, from violent crowds and from those who wanted to kill him – there's a famous story of how he escapes his persecutors by

being lowered down in a basket from a window in the city wall. Peter was rescued by Jesus when he sank into the water and when the storm threatened to pull the disciples' boat under. It's true that both of these Apostles ultimately gave their lives for the Lord as martyrs in the city of Rome: Peter was crucified at the Vatican, where the great basilica bearing his name now stands; and Paul was beheaded and buried outside the city walls, where a great basilica now stands in his honour. But the Lord rescued them at those moments, too: as we celebrate today, He called them to heavenly life, where they now share His glory.

There's another sense in which both Peter and Paul experienced the saving power of Jesus: He saved them from their sin. Peter knew himself to be a sinful man even before the Lord called him; later we see how he is beset with doubts as he tries to walk on the water; he is proud, and so lacks the humility to let Jesus wash his feet; he cuts off the servant's ear in Gethsemane when Jesus is arrested; he denies the Lord three times. Yet he knew the Lord's mercy. Jesus saved him from his pride and his fear. Paul, too, knew this saving power: he had persecuted the Lord's followers and even approved of murder because he was so convinced that he was doing God's work. But after he met Jesus on the Damascus road, his life changed completely: Jesus saved him from his pride, his lack of openness to grace, and called him to become the great missionary to the Gentiles.

All our sins can be like a prison: we end up being trapped by those ways of thinking, speaking and acting which become like habits for us and are so hard to break. We need the Lord to free us. We need Him to open the doors and release us from these chains which deny us real life. Having been rescued and freed by the Lord, Peter and Paul desired to let others receive this gift too. Peter is charged with opening the gates of heaven by his ministry of leading the Church in unity. In love and in truth; Paul was charged with opening the "door of faith" to the pagans.

Peter and Paul are two very different characters, but they knew very well the saving and freeing power of Jesus. They had received from the Lord, and they wanted to pass on what they had received; as Jesus teaches us: "You received without charge; give without charge". It's a point worthy of reflection for each of us: how has God freed me in my life? What are the things that used to enchain me but no longer trouble me: sins, worries, painful situations, doubts? Noticing these things will give us a better awareness of the saving power of God in our lives; it will also encourage us to share with others what we have received. How many people live in some way trapped today? There are so many who are trapped by their suffering, by their own inability to change, by their anger or refusal to forgive, by addiction, or by countless other afflictions. How can we share with them the Lord's saving power? And where do I still feel trapped and in need of the Lord's saving power? How could I be more free to live for Him?

"Who do you say I am?" Jesus asks the disciples in today's Gospel. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", Peter answers. We profess the same faith. And, with Peter, we profess our faith in the liberating power of Jesus, the One whose very name means "God saves": we know You, Lord, to be the One who can free us, deliver us, save us from all that worries, troubles or threatens us. Let Your saving power be at work in our lives and in Your Church, that here on earth we may know You as our Saviour, and one day may walk joyfully through the gates of heaven, flung open for us by Your death and resurrection.

Fr Andrew

