

where you do not wish to go

a sermon preached on the feast of

Saints Peter & Paul

29 June 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

The Lections: Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 34; Acts 9:32.43; John 21:15-22

The enduring legacy of the two apostles sharing this feast day is the fruit of their direct religious experience. According to Luke's account, Peter is given a detailed vision – in which he hears the divine voice declare: “Peter, what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”¹ Also according to Luke, Saul also hears the divine voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”² Though Paul, as he became, does not in any of his substantial writings mention this voice. Rather, in Paul's own description of the encounter he is circumspect in the highest degree – we are given no details whatsoever about the experience, what was said, what Paul saw. “I know a person who in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.”³ Something absolutely momentous has taken place – but Paul refuses, or is unable, to describe it.

What I find to be of tremendous significance is this: in the case of both Peter and Paul, their apostleship is an *outflowing of their direct religious experience*.

This is profoundly important because of the impression that all revelation is handed on by the institution called ‘church’ – and, increasingly, confined to a set of words called the Bible. Indeed, the church is presently killing itself off by regressing further and further into Biblicism and legalism - increasingly threatened by evolution in its widest sense. As this anxiety rises, our inclination is to grip increasingly tightly. Expressions of the church which seem to be ‘successful’ nail down doctrine – offering certainty and supposedly ‘plain biblical truth’.

As vast numbers of people in the West exit the churches, what's left behind is an increasing concentration of this regressive tendency. Vast energies are being squandered in a fight for what is erroneously called ‘orthodoxy’. That most thinking people can see this is really a matter of power and control has apparently escaped us. We seem to be blinded to the fact that this defensive retrograde rear-guard action has absolutely no chance of building the future.

The future – a creative, life-giving, evolution-building, *pleromatic* future, that is – depends, rather, on the same factor which propelled Peter and Paul into epoch-shifting apostleship. Namely, a direct encounter with the Divine which *challenges everything they previously held to be certain*.

In Peter's case, his certainty about religious purity is turned upside down. A faithful Jew – indeed praying the ‘noon office’⁴ – three times Peter has to be told to eat that which religious tradition declared unclean. And only after baptising the household of Cornelius the Roman centurion does Peter realise the enormity of this rooftop vision: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in any nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable.”⁵ The far-reaching consequences of Peter's vision are truly astounding. The experience was clearly more momentous than whatever Peter had learned from Torah, synagogue or religious teacher. Moreover, Peter gives his total allegiance to his experience. Peter's vision apparently enables him to stand his utterly ‘unorthodox’ ground among the hostile and regressive members of the church in Jerusalem⁶ - and to endure yet more to come: “Someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”⁷

Though Saul/Paul never experiences Christ in an ordinary fleshy manner, he nevertheless gives his complete allegiance to that which he only apprehends through mystical encounter. On the basis of this intangible mystical encounter – which Paul makes no attempt to ‘prove’, indeed, he freely admits it cannot be ‘proved’ – Paul stakes everything, his entire understanding of the gospel. This unnameable, indescribable, unprovable encounter is the only basis for Paul's ‘boast’ to be an apostle.⁸ His knowledge of ‘being caught

¹ Acts 10:15

² Acts 9:4

³ 2 Corinthians 12:2

⁴ Acts 10:9

⁵ Acts 10:34

⁶ Acts 11:1-18

⁷ John 21:18

⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:1,5

up into heaven’ – in spite of its indescribability – enables him to depart from the tradition in which he had been a formidable teacher, and to stand his utterly ‘unorthodox’ ground from one end of the Roman Empire to the other.

What seems to matter in both instances, nevertheless, is *complete faithfulness to the experience*. Peter describes this faithfulness in the memorable and somewhat forbidding metaphor of being ‘tested by fire’.⁹ Paul’s experiences, outer and inner, are intense. So intense, that perhaps Paul’s talk of ‘affliction’ is not merely the external photographable facts:¹⁰ “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this [thorn in the flesh], that it would leave me.”¹¹ He makes it clear that long after the actual encounter he continues to be fed, nourished, and strengthened by whatever it was. Indeed, it could even be said that his entire apostleship is the consequence of – and an extended meditation upon – that intense, direct encounter.

This need not surprise us – as though either Peter or Paul were unique, or as though there might be something suspect here. For throughout the Scriptures the Divine erupts in the lives of individual persons - generally via a direct, unexpected, encounter. And this is so obviously the case for none other than the person at the centre of our tradition – whose total, unswerving faithfulness to his experience becomes emblematic for all who would be sons or daughters of God.

Every person is called to an unswerving faithfulness to the reality of Divine encounter. Not, it needs to be added, the superficial or titillating experience which only serves to reinforce a rigidity in prior commitments or convictions. Rather, to that unsought, possibly even unwanted, encounter which defies prior convictions, turning us upside down, taking us where we would not choose to go, urging us forward.

Finally, to argue, as some do, that divine revelation came to an end between the covers of the Bible is futile – in any event, just plain wrong in an evolutionary cosmos. So there’s really very little point in celebrating Peter and Paul *unless we see ourselves in the picture*. The feast – indeed the entire gospel – is an encouragement to *take seriously our own experience of the one who leads us where we do not want to go, and to stake our entire lives on it*.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

⁹ 1 Peter 1:7, 4:1,12

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 1:4ff

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12:8