

HOMILY SAINT PETER AND SAINT PAUL (SUNDAY 13)
“Faith and Forgiveness; Jesus and the Church”
(Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 34; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; Matthew 16:13-19)

Faith and Forgiveness; Jesus and the Church – these are the key words that come to the fore on this feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

This feast urges us to believe in Jesus Christ, and learn to forgive as a member of the Church.

As a new archbishop, I was part of the Western Bishops Ad Limina visit to Rome in 2006. There I learned that celebrating the Eucharist at the four most important churches in Rome was part of our itinerary: the tomb of St. Peter below St. Peter’s Basilica; St. Paul’s Outside the Walls; St. John Lateran (the pope’s see) and St. Mary Major.

To pray where St. Peter was buried, and where St. Paul is said to have been martyred, was a very humbling and moving experience for me. Those emotions flood back into me now as I prepare to celebrate this feast of Saints Peter and Paul. It strikes me that both of these fathers of our Catholic faith experienced Jesus first of all as forgiveness.

Peter’s initial encounter with Jesus involved a miraculous catch of fish. Peter’s response was a spontaneous awareness of his sinfulness in the presence of such holiness, and he blurted out, “Depart from me, Oh Lord, for I am a sinful man.” That, to me, implies an awareness of his need for forgiveness if he was to follow Jesus.

Peter’s encounter with Jesus after the resurrection was similarly an experience of forgiveness. On the shores of Lake Tiberias, after another miraculous catch of fish, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loved him. That was a gentle reminder that Peter had denied the Lord three times, and that he was now being absolutely and totally forgiven his sin. It was that love of Jesus, experienced as forgiveness, that would prepare Peter, more than anything else, to receive the Spirit and become the first head of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Paul’s initial encounter with Jesus was also one of forgiveness and transformation. Saul, as he was known, was an ardent Jew and a rigorous Pharisee, dedicated to keeping the Law. He was on his way to arrest and imprison the heretical followers of Jesus, when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. That blinding light and period of blindness was a liminal, transformative experience for Saul, who underwent a name change as a result. This Jesus, who identified himself with the followers Saul was persecuting, forgave Paul his misguided zealous persecution of his followers and called him to be an apostle of the resurrection. Loved in this way, through forgiveness, Paul would spend the rest of his life spreading the Good News.

A key to the appearance of Jesus to Paul, was the fact that Jesus identified himself with his followers, the Church. There is a tendency today to separate faith in Christ from the

Church. One hears the statement, “Jesus yes; Church no” or “spirituality yes, religion no.” Yet the two are intricately joined. We cannot have Jesus without the Church – it is impossible to separate the two. Jesus is the head; the members of the Church are his body. The first thing Jesus did when he began his public ministry was to call followers together as his disciples, his Church.

Our challenge is to bring the two together; to find Jesus in the Church; to do the work of Jesus as Church, as his Body, his People. And that work, as both Peter and Paul experienced, is the ministry forgiveness, of reconciliation. That is the ministry that is most needed in the world today, yet is most misunderstood.

At a Truth and Reconciliation Conference in Calgary in 2007, I was invited to give a talk. I happened to mention the word “forgiveness” in my talk, and was scolded by one of the participants in that conference, a psychologist. This woman told me in no uncertain terms that as far as she was concerned, the term “forgiveness” did not belong in this process; that it was an imposition on people, that I was biased as a Christian.

When I countered with the comment that if people were not helped to at least move towards forgiveness, they would carry anger for the rest of their lives, she claimed that it was okay to be angry as long as one did not let anger control one’s life.

I have journeyed with countless people over the last thirty years, and my experience has taught me just the opposite. One cannot carry anger, and be happy and free. Moreover, unaddressed anger simply goes deeper and become resentment. It can than morphe into many other painful emotions such as hatred, bitterness, cynicism, blame and depression. Depression is really anger that has gone inwards.

Towards the end of his life on earth, Jesus prayed for unity and oneness for his Church. The ability to let go of anger and resentment and the desire for revenge through forgiveness is the key to achieving this goal of unity and oneness. There is nothing more priceless, nothing closer to an experience of the Kingdom of God, than the intimacy, unity and oneness that two people experience when they achieve intimacy through a process of communicating with love, of total trust and acceptance, or forgiveness.

One lady taking a Marriage Encounter weekend, when asked how she felt when she achieved intimacy with her spouse, had to search for words, but finally ended up saying that she felt like there were no walls, no barriers, no boundaries, between her and her spouse. It struck me that she was talking about salvation, that she was already experiencing the Kingdom of God, in her relationship with her spouse.

Jesus himself would say in the gospel of John that those who keep his commandment, who love others by forgiving them, will experience the Father and him coming to make their home in them, and that he will reveal himself to them. Those are powerful statements. Think about it – one of the best ways to experience God in this life, is to achieve intimacy with another human being. And that can only happen where there is total trust, acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today, is itself an experience of God's forgiving love. Jesus accepts us as we are, and believes in who we can become. Through Word and Sacrament, we are loved, forgiven, healed, and then sent out to spread the Good News of forgiveness.

So, let us truly believe in Jesus Christ, and learn to forgive as a members of his Body, the Church.