

A REFLECTION BY BRIAN PIERSE OP ON ST PETER AND ST PAUL, IN PREPARATION FOR THEIR FEASTDAY THIS TUESDAY 29 JUNE

Once a year the Church sets aside a very special day to celebrate her two eldest sons, Peter and Paul. Whereas most saints get a particular feast day to themselves, since ancient times these two pivotal martyrs of the early Church share the same feast. It seems there is a deep wisdom in this ancient tradition, a wisdom that points to the very nature and mission of the Church in the world.

Not unlike other brothers, Peter and Paul were not exactly cut from the same mould. Their differences represent what lies at the heart of Christian community: a rich diversity which is both creative tension and the path to integration. There is perhaps no word that we associate so deeply with the Apostle Peter as his being called Rock by Jesus. A rock is hard, firm, not easily moved: it gives stability and rootedness. He was a man of the earth and of the sea, grounded, hearty and faithful: he knew how to hold fast and stand firm in the midst of the tumult of the storm that arose on the sea of Galilee. Jesus knew his friend well: he called Peter to be the elder brother, the one entrusted with caring for the others.

We are not given an image for the Apostle Paul in the scriptures: but, if Peter is the rock, Paul is the water. While rocks are firm and steadfast, water is flexible, moving, searching out the lowest place, always in flux. Unlike Peter, Paul travelled extensively; like a rushing river he was always moving forward, breaking new ground. Paul was the kind of person whose life and movements affected all those around him. It is no surprise that his vocation was one of moving out with the Good News, rushing forth to ends of the earth.

The Church is Peter and Paul, it is the key to understanding who we are today, a community of diversity. A people made one within the mystery of being many. Although most of us are predominantly either a Peter-person or a Paul-person, there is a mixture of both in all of us. Even the two Apostles had both dimensions in them. Peter was certainly the stable rock for the early Church, but he was also called to flow out into the world of mission. Paul, the itinerant preacher, also knew how to be firm and steadfast in his convictions.

When Jesus asks his disciples "Who do you say that I am?", he is calling forth not only their vision of him but also their vision of themselves. As soon as we define who Jesus is for us, then inherent in that definition is a commitment to following Jesus in that particular way. Perhaps Peter went on to say "You, Lord, are the one to whom we can turn in times of trial. Your steadfast love is our strength in the midst of the storm". Had Paul been present what might he have answered? "You, Jesus, are the shepherd who searches out the lost sheep, the one who always welcomes the outsider". Paul's vision of Jesus was the basis of his own unique vocation: flow out life-giving water to the ends of the earth.

Certainly many people are ready for some fresh pauline breezes to blow in the terrain of the Church. Such longing is testimony to the fact that the Church needs both Peter and Paul for the full life of the community to be present: thus we grow into our true nature as Jesus' band of believers. We have a rich tradition with which to nourish our hearts along the pilgrim path. We must be daring in our search for balance and integration. If there is anything that Peter and Paul have left us it is a profound faith in the Spirit of Jesus breathed into the community of disciples. We are blood brothers and sisters who together bear witness to the one in whom "all things in heaven and earth were created and in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:15-20).