

Sermon for Sunday 30 June 2024 – Peter and Paul

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Acts 12.1-11; Psalm 125; 2 Timothy 4.6-8,17,18; Matthew 16.13-19

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

I want you to imagine that you've been given the great responsibility by the board of directors of a large company to headhunt two people who will lead the next phase of a long-established project of global significance. These two people that you are to headhunt are to be the public face of the organisation, and they are to communicate its vision and its values to the wider world, working collaboratively with each other, but also working independently, often in different territories. What sort of qualities might you look for? How about these two possible candidates?

Candidate one. He has no formal education, but he has served an apprenticeship. He's worked in the family business, but abandoned it about three years ago on the spur of the moment to follow a public figure on an itinerant preaching tour. Sometimes he speaks without engaging his brain and acts on impulse (and no, it's not the curate). He's been known to carry an offensive weapon in public places and has, on at least one occasion, committed grievous bodily harm with said sharp weapon. He has some prior experience to the project, but he's also been shown to be somebody who lacks resilience and crumbles under pressure. However, he has done further work on the project.

Candidate two. He's had a very formal education, and he's been tutored under an exceptional tutor. He's a high achiever who's progressed through his chosen profession at a fast pace. He also has experience of the project, but has recently been hostile to those involved with the next phase of the project. He's been accomplice to murder of one of the people involved in the project, who, coincidentally, was appointed by candidate one. But he's now claiming to have met the founder of the project, and as a result, is wholeheartedly embracing its visions and values.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think that if you went to the board of directors saying, I've got two candidates for this project, and you gave those two CVs, they would first check the calendar to see whether it was April the first, and then question your ability to select potential employees. And yet those descriptions, in very rough outline and a bit tongue in cheek, are those of the two patron saints to which this church is dedicated.

First candidate was St Peter, second candidate was St Paul. If you want to look at that more in detail, read the Gospels, we'll find out about Peter. Read Acts, we'll find out about Peter and Paul, read all Paul's letters, and read 1 and 2 Peter, Peter's letters. That'll leave you three, four books of the New Testament that you've not read.

So candidate one, Peter; Simon Peter, Kephas, same person, ethnically Jewish from Bethsaida in the north region of Lake Galilee. He's Jewish, so he would have been schooled in the Hebrew scriptures until the age of 12, memorising the Torah, at least the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, as we have them. He would have lived according to the Jewish faith, but he became a peasant fisherman in the family business. He encountered Jesus and responded to his invitation to follow him. We see in the gospel accounts that Peter was impulsive. He was protective of Jesus to the point where he cut off the high priest servant's ear when they were trying to arrest him in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. He denied knowing Jesus. And yet Luke tells us that on Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to Peter. Not the John 21 appearance at the beach barbecue, which we'll hear tonight; there's a little detail that when the disciples who met Jesus on the Emmaus Road came to tell the disciples in Jerusalem, they said, 'Yeah, we already know Jesus has appeared. He's appeared to Peter'. He's forgiven, he's restored, we read in John 21. Then he acts as spokesperson for the followers of Jesus when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost.

Candidate two was Paul, known as Saul, then known as Paul. Also Jewish, but born in Tarsus, Southeastern Turkey. Like Peter, he would have learned the Torah and lived according to the Jewish faith. But unlike Peter, he would train under Gamaliel. He would go to Jerusalem to a top school. Think Eton, or think Theological Colleges - Ridley. (sorry, Elke; Westcott is also a theological college; there's no rivalry between the two colleges in Cambridge at all, is there?) But he would have learned the Jewish scriptures, what it was to be Jewish and to become a Pharisee. He was a firebrand; he was zealous for the purity of the Jewish faith; he was unhappy about the followers of Jesus claiming many things that Jesus was the Saviour, he was the Messiah, the promised one, the chosen one of God, who had been sent to begin this work of restoration and recreation in a broken world and broken humanity. There was no way in Paul's mind that the leader of this movement, this messianic movement, who died a shameful death on the cross, could be God's chosen Messiah. So he proceeded to attempt to wipe out this fledgling movement, killing off its support if necessary.

Peter and Paul, two seemingly totally different characters, but for their Jewish heritage. And yet they become the two most unlikely but prominent figures in the early church. Peter, focusing on bringing the good news of Jesus to a Jewish audience, predominantly, and Paul to a Gentile, or non-Jewish, audience, predominantly, albeit with considerable crossover. Enemies, to begin with, as Peter had claimed Jesus as Messiah, and Paul persecuted the early church for claiming that. And yet Peter writes later in one of his letters of 'Our beloved brother Paul'. He goes on to say - he writes some very difficult things in his letters, and with that I would agree - 'our beloved brother Paul', this person who had been complicit in the murder of Stephen, one of the early leaders of the church, and no doubt a friend of Peter's. They differ in so many ways, but I want to look at what unites them.

We could spend a good long time looking at this. But along with the Jewish people, people of Israel; Israel is a people, not a place; they would have been longing for God to intervene, to mend the broken world, to restore the relationship of Israel to God, to end the oppression and exile of the people of God, not least under Roman occupation. They would have been waiting for God to fulfil his promise that he would send a new King David to shepherd God's people. Again, we'll hear that in a reading this evening, at

Evensong, from Ezekiel 34. But four things that they ended up agreeing on; because their understanding of Jesus, or technically called Christology, their understanding of Jesus was changed. They came to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the promised by God in their scriptures. They would change through personal encounter. Peter, he'd travelled with Jesus, Paul on the Damascus road. Peter, making the declaration that we heard in our gospel reading, You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Their understanding of salvation; technically, it's soteriology; but their understanding of salvation was transformed as they understood that because of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit, God's work of restoration and recreation had begun. That forgiveness of sins, the renewing of relationship with God was all possible now, not through following religious rules, but by following and having faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Their understanding of the end times, the age to come that the Jewish people look forward to when God would do his work of restoration and recreation had now begun, the Messianic age. Because if Messiah has come, the Messianic age has commenced with everything that that means about the fulfilment of God's promises.

Their understanding of what is to be the people of God, to be church, their ecclesiology. It's been changed because it's no longer limited to a Jewish people, a unique ethnic group, but it expands to include anyone who follows Jesus. It's fair to say that Peter and Paul had their disputes about how that should work out. You can read about that in Acts with various discussions and the Council of Jerusalem. You can read in Galatians 2, Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he's defending his work as an apostle and the gospel that it is through faith in Jesus that you are included in the family of God. He recounts when Peter came to Antioch and started living a bit more Jewish and the rules, he said, 'I had to, in public, correct him'. And no doubt Paul did that in no uncertain terms. So their understanding of Jesus to be the promised Messiah has been changed. They understand that Jesus is the means for forgiveness and restoration. They understand that the age to come, the messianic age, has begun. And they understand the people of God are now those who follow Jesus.

That's all very well, you say, Graham. All very interesting. What does it for us here in Lavenham, who gather as a community of God's people in a church building dedicated to St Peter and St Paul. It was the agreement between Peter and Paul about what it is to be the people of God, what it is to be church, here in Lavenham, that I want to highlight. As Jews, the Jerusalem temple would have been the focus of worship, of prayer. It's where you went to receive healing. It's where you went to receive forgiveness through the sacrifice system. It's where the poor were cared for. It's the place where God's presence was found. It was the absolute focus of the Jewish people. Temple. That's where God is. That's where we can be forgiven. That's where we worship. That's where we pray. That's where we can be healed. That's where we care for the poor.

And yet Peter writes this to the early church; 'Come to him (that's Jesus), a living stone. Though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight. Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, a temple, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' Paul similarly writes expecting a yes to this question; 'Do you not know that you, collectively, as a community of believers, are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you collectively.'

Peter and Paul, patrons, saints of this church here in Lavenham, agree that not the physical temple in Jerusalem and not this magnificent building, magnificent though it is. Simon and I joked the other day to a couple of visitors, it's not a bad little office to work in. But they see the temple, the place where God dwells, the Holy of Holies, where he dwelt in the tabernacle as they wandered around the wilderness, the people of Israel wandered around the wilderness, and the physical temple in Jerusalem. The Holy of Holies, where God dwells, lives, resides, is now the community of believers.

Just turn... You've been very Anglican this morning; you're a bit spread out. But turn to people near you and say this, 'I am a living stone being built into a spiritual temple where God can dwell'. It wasn't a rhetorical instruction. Just turn to each other and say, 'I'm a living stone being built into a temple where God's spirit can dwell'. Or if you can't remember all that, say, 'I'm part of the Holy of Holies where God dwells by his Holy Spirit'. As you say it to each other, just let that sink in. You're not here on a Sunday morning to just sing hymns and feel good about it, say words, take communion. You are here to be a community of believers where God's spirit can dwell. And then go out into the world and be the image of the living God. Gordon Fee, one of my favourite theologians, says this in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, having just discussed Paul talking about the church being temple in 1 Corinthians 3. I think it would be good for us to ponder this this morning as we look back on the years of ministry and worship and prayer that's gone on in this place dedicated to Ss Peter and Paul, and as we look to the future ministry here.

Because I think what he says, Peter and Paul would agree with. He says this; 'One of the most desperate needs of the local parish church is to recapture this vision of being temple, of what it is by grace and therefore what God intends it to be. Seldom, sadly, does one sense that it is or can be experienced as a community that is so powerfully indwelt by God's Holy Spirit that it functions as a genuine alternative to the pagan world in which it is found. It is perhaps not too strong to suggest that recapturing of this vision of its being, in terms both of its being powerfully indwelt by the Holy Spirit and of its thereby serving as a genuine alternative to the pagan world around it. It's the local parish church's single greatest need.' The single greatest need of the local parish church to rediscover what it is to be a temple where God's Spirit can dwell and be an alternative to the pagan world around it as we minister to the place, we worship God collectively, and as we minister healing and grace to a world that so needs it. Amen.