

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

**Saints Peter and Paul** *transferred* 28 June 2015

Peter and Paul are chalk and cheese. They could hardly be more unlike as people. They could hardly be more unlikely as leaders of God's Church. Think about it for a moment. Peter is the rural Galilean fisherman. Paul is the educated Pharisee from sophisticated Tarsus. Peter lived and travelled with Jesus, but no further than the Galilee and Jerusalem, three days walk. Paul never met Jesus but eventually travelled the Mediterranean world in Jesus' name.

Yet it is these two disciples whose faith we recall today and from whose story we can take heart for our future. If either of these two were up for election as a bishop or even a vicar, they wouldn't stand a chance today. I doubt we would have the courage to elect them given their flawed track records and the reputational risk they would be considered to be. Think about that for a moment!

Peter denied knowing Jesus three times just when Jesus most needed witnesses to speak up for him. Yes, eventually Jesus forgave Peter and Peter is transformed by that. But these days we don't want to acknowledge that our leaders are all too human, just like us. We would be more likely to shun a Peter today than to embrace him; but the embrace of the community was Peter's salvation.

Paul actively persecuted the followers of Jesus. He stood by and held the cloaks of those who took them off so that it was easier to hurl the stones that killed Stephen. Later, no doubt shaken by Stephen's faith even in death, Paul has a vision of the risen Christ and becomes his follower. We would be very suspicious today of any leader who shifted from adversary to apostle. Paul did have to defend his leadership among the early churches! He admitted his weaknesses and then showed in his living how God's strength is best seen in human weakness.

Peter and Paul argued. Peter initially wanted Christians to become Jews first. Paul had become convinced that was no longer necessary. God was at work among the uncircumcised and they need not be burdened with the obligations of Jewish ways. They argued it out vigorously! The first synod in Jerusalem was no Sunday school picnic. Peter would eventually accept that the old prohibitions need not apply to Gentiles and willingly shared food with them, previously for him an unimaginable crossing of a Jewish boundary.

Two unlikely leaders, yet used by God. In a time when we are wondering what the future of our parish will be like, it is good to recall these two, Peter and Paul. It is understandable that when we see how secular the world around us is these days, and how fewer and fewer people are interested in even the rumour of God, we can feel anxious about the parish's future life

But what is that we are anxious about? Are we actually expressing a kind of lament that the way we've known things won't be the way future generations live their life in Christ? I am aware of that lament within me. But a few months ago I was walking back to the vicarage from the vestry and I happened to turn to admire the new roof we put on

this building two years ago now. I looked up and thought that the generations who built this church building could no more imagine me, a vicar who is a woman, than I can imagine who will follow us in a hundred years.

Once people came here on foot or horse and buggy. Now we make provision for car parking, and a good thing too! . How will the congregation arrive in, eighty years' time, in 2095? What kind of clothing will they wear? What hymns will they sing? We can wonder, but the future belongs to God and to those who come after us. While our human desire might be to *control* that future, our faith invites us to *trust* the God of the future.

So, anxiety for the *institution* of the church, the way we do things now, is real and understandable but not fruitful. What is *fruitful*, what will be good for us is renewing our confidence in the life of the Body of Christ. What I mean is, our confidence in God who will continue to work through many or just a few, flawed and failing though they might be at times, and who will continue to do that in season and out, in the life of the institution in all its changing forms.

*What we need not be anxious about is whether there will be a church.* And one of the reasons we can be confident is that God does not need perfect leaders, nor even perfect parishioners in big numbers for that to be so. God has shown us in Peter and Paul that God works through earthen vessels and in times that do not look any more promising than two thousand years ago.

Peter and Paul, flawed but confident that God is at work in Jesus Christ to transform the world because they could tell the story of how God had transformed their lives. That's really all we need now –our stories. In the telling we will be laying foundations for a future we cannot imagine, but which God already has.

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