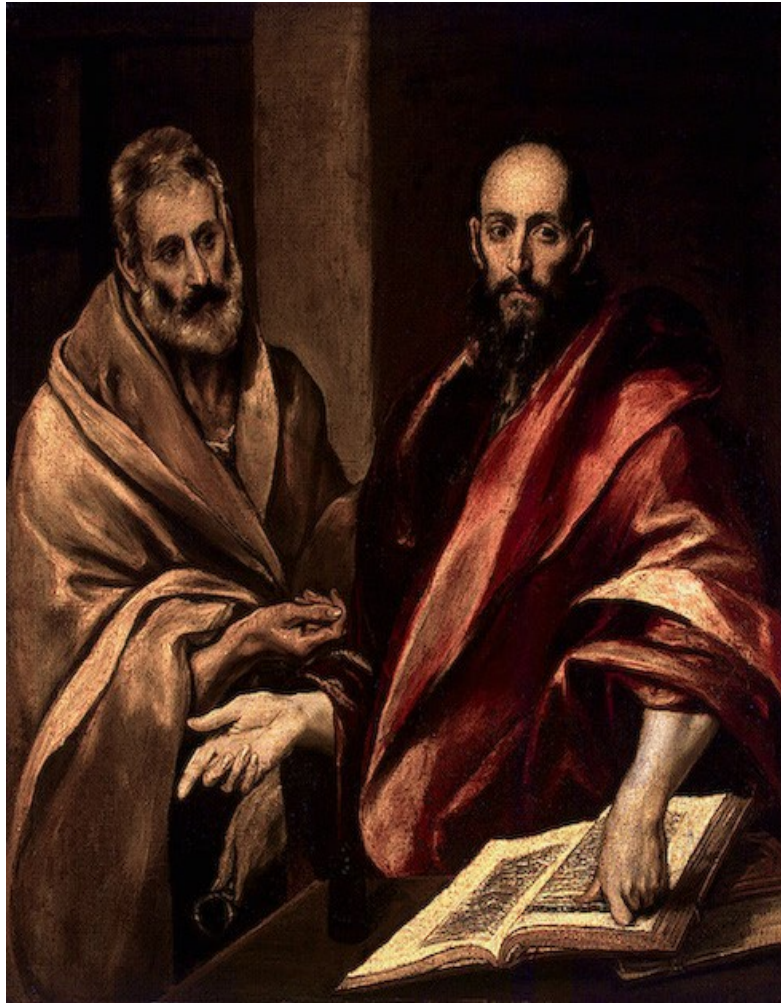


# The Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation)



Peter & Paul, apostles

## Wellsprings of Faith

28<sup>th</sup> June 2009

**Note:**

*1. It is common and natural to question why we should confess to a priest. Are the clergy, after all, simply setting themselves up as the channel (and therefore, perhaps, the barrier) between the sinner and the God of mercy? There are two things to consider: why the Church is involved and why the priest is involved.*

*It is true that God's mercy and love may come to us alone in countless unknown ways. We may be given the grace of conversion from sin by many hidden forms of desire for contrition and for God's forgiveness without any sacrament and indeed, without any explicit reference to Christ or clear profession of faith. It is possible to be forgiven by God, as it is possible to worship God, without knowing anything of the christian community.*

*As an ordinary human thing, however, forgiveness, like worship, has to do with our life together. God's forgiveness comes to us sacramentally and visibly when we are forgiven and accepted and, in the name of Christ welcomed back from grave sin by the whole people of God. Through this sacrament we share not only in the forgiven - but in the forgiving - Church. True contrition is hardly compatible with a positive refusal to respond to this loving offer of reconciliation.*

*Why the priest? Because by ordination the bishop or priest is authorised to represent the whole people of God at this moment of reconciliation; to speak in the name of the whole Church; and thus, in the name of Christ Himself, to accept us and to proclaim to us and assure us, of our forgiveness and new life.*

# Wellsprings

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no.4

Penance

28<sup>th</sup> June 2009

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*The sacrament of Penance is the rite by which, through the ministry of the Church, we are reconciled to God even when we have sinned gravely after being liberated from original sin in Baptism.*

*A grave or mortal (deadly) sin is an act that is directly contrary to charity, because it destroys the friendship which is the life of God in us.*

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## **Introduction**

The readings for the Feast of apostles, Peter and Paul, (28<sup>th</sup> June 2009) introduce the theme of successful discipling. The liturgy of the church presents the two great apostles, Peter and Paul, together. Each of these figures illuminates the other. The so-called profession of faith of Peter (Mt.16:13-19) is a central text in the gospels. Today it is presented as the starting point and the foundation of Peter's mission and through him, the mission of all the followers of Jesus. And in a text from the letter to the Galatians, which is read on the vigil of the feast, Paul claims the rights inherent to the vocation he received. Unlike Peter, Paul was not among the first followers of Jesus. But his mission was directly entrusted to him, "through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

We will reflect on the readings of the apostles' feast day, aware that they are significant to the matter of our own following of Jesus' Way – that is – to our own role as disciples of Jesus! Peter and Paul's apostleship centred on recognising Jesus as, “*the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*” So too our hearing the, “good news” and our experiencing His “presence” in the eucharistic liturgy, is at the heart of our mission as Jesus' disciples.

We focus on making the Sunday liturgy readings central to finding our true role as Jesus' disciples. By providing for a future review of our performance in light of these readings, the sacrament of Penance takes on deeper meaning and relevance to our lives as modern disciples of Jesus, “in the world.”

## **Acts 12 : 1 - 11**

*The story in Acts moves from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria, and ends in Rome. Peter and Paul, in their persons, focus this movement. They witness the spirit of Jesus to Hebrew and no-Hebrew alike, during the first thirty years of Christian history.*

Acts divides that early history of the Christian community into two almost equal periods. The first period, centred on Peter, ends with the last reference to the apostle at the meeting in Jerusalem (Ac.15). Peter confirms Paul's circumcision-free ministry to the Gentiles (Ac.15:7-11). Paul (Saul) has been introduced (Ac.9) and then becomes the vehicle of the spirit of Jesus in the second part of Acts, just as Peter is such a vehicle in the early part of the story. Herod arrested Peter during the preparation for celebration of Passover (Ac.12:3-4). Linking Peter's arrest and release with the Exodus-commemoration – or Passover – is deliberate. Peter was with Jesus during His arrest and His Easter "exodus" in Passover Week. Now Peter comes into the life of the early community (Ac.12:6-11).

New events around Peter demonstrate the same power of God working through him as with Jesus! Peter's arrest and release are evidence of the same reality and power that accompanied Jesus' "exodus"! The Spirit of God, active in raising Jesus, is active at the beginnings of the church, when Peter is released. There's a continuity. The holy Spirit that moved other liberating agents in history and was conspicuously active in the story of Jesus, moves Peter in the same way as the Spirit moved the likes of Moses; the prophets; the Baptist; and Jesus! Later in Acts, after Peter fades from the record, this line of continuity will extend to include the witness of Paul. The same spirit of liberation and newness that characterised the work of the prophets and Jesus, is now active in the early church through Peter. In response to the community's prayer (Ac.12:5). God renewed for Peter the wonders of the original Hebrew Exodus and of Jesus' own "exodus."

## **2 Timothy 4 : 6 – 8, 17 - 18**

*The Second Letter to Timothy is in the form of a farewell statement from Paul that sums up his whole life as an offering to God.*

The form of the letter is a farewell statement from Paul. Paul is not thinking of a possible execution – but his whole life culminating in his imminent death – as his offering to God! Since his conversion, he had offered everything to God; his money; scholarship; time; vigour of body; acuteness of mind; and devotion of heart! Only his life itself was left to offer. And he is prepared to offer that as well! The writer interprets Paul's attitude as the ending of his life approaches.

The author draws a message for his own era with three metaphors comparing the discipleship of Jesus (2 T.4:17-18). Paul's life was, "poured out" in the way pagans and Hebrews made drink-offering to their god/s. According to the Christian tradition, Paul won his, "crown of victory" as a scapegoat for Nero's unpopularity after the great fires of Rome. Reviewing Paul's life, the writer turns his thought to athletic imagery. Good disciples having, "fought the good fight" and "won the race" – that is – remained loyal and faithful to the gospel of Jesus – can look forward to receiving the "crown of victory" which is the crown of the power-for-life, which will not wither or die like laurel leaves!

### **Matthew 16 : 13 - 19**

*Matthew wrote to reconcile the more reasonable followers of James and of Paul, in that the Torah binds, but only as reinterpreted by Jesus!*

Jesus asked his disciples who they thought the Son of man was (vv.13-15). Matthew's gospel is built around the coming of The One. Only Jesus uses the title, "Son of man" ( in Hebrew it means: a human one; THE human one; or humankind in general ). In the Book of Daniel the phrase is used to describe a glorious figure who will receive from God the kingdom to come! By reporting that Jesus asked this question, Matthew shows that (Jesus) is interested in knowing what people were thinking about the ONE-who-is-to-come.

Among the answers offered by the disciples the names of John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah are mentioned (Mt.16:14). The Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah were all fiery personalities. They were prophets who raised questions about evil powers and authorities - about the government of their times! But Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Mt.16:16 NJB). Matthew identifies Jesus with THE One. Peter uses the title as a statement of victory. At the moment that opposition to Jesus came into the open and hardened against Jesus, Peter proclaims, "Jesus, YOU are the Messiah!" The other disciples were saying that he was merely a new prophet. But Peter states that Jesus is the-ONE-who-is-to-come; that Jesus wasn't merely announcing the reigning of God - prophets had done that already - he was affirming that with the coming of Jesus, the reigning of God had come about!

Jesus' disciples hadn't noticed any change. Therefore in their eyes he must have been another prophet! They hadn't seen anything about Him to suggest God's powerful reigning. Those who confess Jesus to be the Messiah of God, live out the unique graciousness that initiates the self-revelation of God. Even now, through this text, this graciousness keeps

disclosing to the modern community of disciples, who Jesus is! Peter emerges as the recipient of such grace. He came to understand that Jesus was more than a prophet. He was the-ONE-who-was-to-come to fulfill the words of the prophets!

Peter believed in changing the world. Jesus called him blessed (Mt.16:17a). Many Christians still believe that Jesus is merely a prophet - and nothing more! But Peter is the, "rock" on which Jesus says, "I can build my community and the gates of the underworld can never overpower it" (Mt.16:18 NJB). Petros in Greek is, "rock." Jesus gives Peter a nickname, when he announced on whom he will build his church. Church comes from a Greek word "ekklesia" which didn't mean a religious institution at that time. It meant, "a gathering," or "a community." Some of us can remember the translation, "the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Mt.16:18) – but, "the power of death," is nearer to the original meaning. Jesus was not talking about hell as we understand it now. He meant the "Sheol" of the Hebrews or "Hades" of the Greeks - the region of the dead!

In Matthew's account the declaration of who Jesus is, has special significance for the disciples' identity as a community. Peter emerges as the receiver of a revelation and as the foundation stone on which the community of disciples will be built! Peter and the community of disciples draw their distinctiveness from the confessions that claim them - not their own qualities! The firmness of Peter's faith, is his conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, or "THE ONE" who comes to change the world! Jesus notices that nobody else dared to talk with the same firmness of conviction. Jesus told Peter he was, "a rock" and that he (Peter) could form a community which not even the powers of death could overcome! In a true community individuals don't die because they are in community with Jesus, and he will conquer death! If death can't do anything, other enemies can do even less!

Jesus "exits" leaving the work of extending of the reigning of God as the responsibility of His disciples. Jesus gives authority to leaders to condemn the rule of Economic Rationalists and Socialists and to defend the exploited. The community of disciples was intended to extend the reigning of God. But the reigning of God would not be we call, "the church!" The reigning of God would overflow the church to cover the whole Earth! St.Paul said that in the end, the Messiah will deliver this, "kingdom to the Father after destroying all other powers and authorities, and the last enemy to be destroyed will be death" (1 Co.15:24-25). That's the same reason Jesus says the powers of death will not overpower this community!

## Items for Sharing

- When Herod arrested Peter it was the time of Passover. Peter went through trial and deliverance as Jesus had done! It marked the completion of his discipleship. He became like Jesus. He is an example for the Christian community of a liberated person; a witness to the reality of the Passover salvation brought about for us through Jesus' death and resurrection.  
Comment on the first reading from Acts 12 : 1 - 11.
- Paul is thinking of his whole life, culminating in his imminent death, as his offering to God. Since his conversion, he had offered everything to God. Only life itself was left to offer and he is prepared to offer that too!  
Comment on the second reading from 2 Timothy 4 : 6 - 8, 17 - 18.
- The phrase “son of man” could be rendered in non-sexist terms as, “child of Adam (and Eve)” as in Psalm 8:4. That lacks something of the mysterious impact of Daniel 7:13, where the phrase refers to a mysterious leader, or representative figure – “the holy One of the Most High.” It is the latter interpretation that Matthew develops in his gospel; affirming Jesus' authority to correctly interpret the divine will to establish the reigning of God. Matthew tends to localise the reigning of God – and identify the community on Earth as the reigning of the, “son of man.”  
Comment on the reading from the gospel of Matthew 16 : 13 - 19.

## Prayer

All powerful and ever-loving God,  
We do well always and everywhere  
to give You thanks.

You founded Your church on the apostles  
to stand firm for ever  
as the sign on Earth of Your infinite holiness  
and as the living Gospel for all to hear.

With steadfast love  
we speak Your unending praise;  
we join the hosts of heaven  
in their triumphant song. Amen  
*( From the Preface Prayer of Apostles II )*

## **Review**

We gather on the feast of the apostles Peter and Paul, to celebrate the result of Jesus' successful apprenticing of the disciples. Peter and Paul showed how their lives; their bodies; and their imaginations were weaned from the deathliness of their world-in-crisis towards the new world of God's reigning.

Thus we began a conversation about leadership in realising a new ecological, social, & spiritual reality in our age. The apostles Peter and Paul, dedicated their lives to equip others to serve Christ in their neighbour. But we narrow our ministry to serve ourselves. They dedicated their lives to equip others to serve Christ in their neighbour. But we narrow our ministry to serve ourselves. They worked selflessly to unify and mature faith and knowledge of the Son of God. But we allow ourselves to be blown about by every wind of doctrine - by people's trickery and scheming.

When we come to review our performance at the end of the week after hearing this gospel, it is relevant to examine our conscience about the way we have implemented that Word and lived out that Presence we heard and experienced in the liturgy.

Perhaps there is much we could examine ourselves without the obvious list of usual failures, becoming aware that discipleship is synonymous with acting of the commands of Jesus – that is doing His Word – of treating others as we would have them treat ourselves and thus extending the reigning of God on Earth!

### **For further consideration:**

- Look at a copy of the Rite of Penance (Reconciliation ) from last Friday. ( There are some copies at the rear of the church from the 12<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time).
- It uses the previous Sunday's gospel to examine one's performance. The gospel text might not exhaust our possible failures, but in the case where we might think we have nothing to confess, it may be enlightening to use this standard – the bit of the gospel chosen for our present instruction in the Way of Jesus.
- Having re-considered what the gospel demanded, we can become more sensitive to the will of God and how we may have been remiss in our response to our mission as Jesus' disciples. This is the suggested way of restoring the importance of the Sacrament of Penance.