

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 12:1-11
<i>Response</i>	The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 16:13-19

The solemnity of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul is an ancient feast and a very venerable feast in the Roman Church. Today, I'm going to look at the readings for the Mass during the day that the Church celebrates on June 29th, this very important feast. Now, the Gospel reading for today is from Matthew 16:13-19. This is the famous passage about Peter as the rock. I have dealt with this passage in several other places, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it today, except to just highlight for you that the verse, Matthew 16:18:

you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.¹

is the foundational text for the understanding of St. Peter as the rock, as the one upon whom the Church is built, and also is the foundational text for understanding Peter's role, not just with regard to the universal Church, but with regard to the Church at Rome in particular. Peter is the rock of the Church as a whole, but he's also the first bishop, so to speak, of the Church of Rome. And so, that episcopal foundation, as it were, is something that rests on Peter, the person of Peter who is the rock. Now, that's just a very brief point there. But today, I'd like to spend more time actually going back and looking at the first reading because this is one we don't hear frequently in the lectionary. And that's the description of Peter's imprisonment in Acts 12:1-11. So let's go back and look at that today because what the church is reflecting on today is not just Peter and Paul's role as these two pillar apostles for the church at Rome. In particular, it is reflecting on the mystery of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

their martyrdom. And so, although we don't have an account of the martyrdom of Peter in the Gospels or in the Book of Acts, for example, we do have an account of Peter's imprisonment in which he is configured to Christ and, in a sense, anticipates his martyrdom in Acts 12. So, look at those verses with me for just a minute. Acts 12:1-11 says this:

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

The very night when Herod was about to bring him out, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your mantle around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him; he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel left him. And Peter came to himself, and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

Now, you might think, "Why is the Church reading the account of Peter escaping from prison on the day we're remembering his martyrdom?" The answer, I would suggest to you, is twofold. Firstly, although Peter does escape from prison in this particular instance, notice that the passage reveals that Peter is conforming his life to the sufferings of Jesus. How? Well, look at what happens. Peter's in Jerusalem during the days of unleavened bread at the time of Passover. Let's see, when was Jesus arrested, right? Brought before Herod and then thrown into prison to be executed. It was during the days of unleavened bread at the time of the Passover. So, in other words, just as Jesus was imprisoned at the time of Passover and then

eventually put to death, so too Peter is being arrested at the very same season, during the very same festival, that his master was arrested at. And although we know that Peter gets out of prison at the end of it all, what do you think Peter would have thought as he's sitting there in prison during Passover, awaiting his fate, especially if it takes place right on the heels of James, the brother of John, having been executed as the first of the apostles to be put to death? On a human level, it seems abundantly clear to me, at least, that Peter would expect to be put to death just as Jesus was put to death and just as James was put to death. So, there's a kind of configuration of St. Peter here to Christ himself. He's undergoing a kind of anticipation of the passion in the very place where Jesus himself had been imprisoned and then scourged and suffered and then put to death on the cross.

Now, of course, this isn't Peter's time. It's not his hour, so to speak. So, the angel comes to him in the middle of the night and says, "Get up, dress yourself, and come. I'm going to take you out." He's going to be rescued, although Peter thinks it's a dream or a vision that he's seeing. Peter is actually delivered by the angel. Now, this other aspect of the text is fascinating to me because it makes me think of a passage from the Gospel of John. Although the martyrdom of Peter is not narrated anywhere in the New Testament, it is anticipated in John 21 in Jesus's famous but cryptic prophecy to Peter. And listen to what Jesus says (John 21:18):

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.)

So, pause there. Isn't it interesting that Jesus describes Peter's eventual martyrdom in terms of formally being able to get dressed and go where he wants to go, but in the future, having someone else dress him and being led where he doesn't want to go, right? It's a kind of twofold description. And apparently, John expects his readers to know by what death Peter is going to die, we're going to see in a minute it's through crucifixion. But I can't help but notice that in Acts 12 today, the angel says, "Get up, dress yourself, and then leave." So, Peter dresses himself and is able to escape in his youth, here in his prime. But then eventually, he'll be led to a place he doesn't want to go. He'll be dressed by another and brought out to an execution, which will end with his death. So, in summary, I think that this passage is actually a beautifully selected text to reflect how Peter is being gradually, more and more closely configured to Christ in his passion, in his imprisonment and his suffering, and then eventually in his death. So that's the first reading for today.

The second reading for today is from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. And here, once again, although the execution of Paul, the martyrdom of Paul, is not narrated anywhere in the New Testament, his eventual death is anticipated in one of the Pauline letters, and that's in Second Timothy 4:6-8, 17-17. Let's see what Second Timothy 4 says. Here, Paul writes this:

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed;^[a] the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

And then it skips down to verses 17 and 18. Paul says:

But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

All right, so notice what we see here. Another passage in which Paul, like Peter, anticipates that he's going to be martyred eventually but also praises God for having rescued him in the past from death. Once again, if you read Paul's letters, especially Second Corinthians 11, you'll see, Paul, like Peter, is gradually configured to Christ. He participates in the sufferings of Christ. He's beaten in various synagogues. He's even stoned on one part, and they don't stop stoning you until they think you're dead. He suffers from shipwreck. He's adrift for a night and a day on the sea. So his ministry is filled with suffering, and in some cases, God rescues him from that suffering. But eventually, as he recognizes, he is going to be sacrificed, and his time of departure, the time of his martyrdom, will eventually come. But even in spite of that, he will be rescued, not from physical death, but for the Kingdom of God, for eternal life with Christ. So those are the two passages, very beautifully selected text here, reflecting the configuration of Peter and Paul to Christ in his suffering, and then eventually in his death.

And so, I'd like to end the video here, by just making a reference to the living tradition. In this case, although we don't have descriptions of the death of the apostles in the Gospels or in the Acts of the Apostles, we do have descriptions of them in the writings of the early Church Fathers. So, I'll call attention to this book that I found very helpful by Sean McDowell. It's called *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus*. So what it

does is it goes through the various Twelve Apostles, as well as the apostle Paul, and it collects from the early Church Fathers and other ancient Christian writings, the earliest traditions about what the Apostles suffered and how they met their death. And so, in this case, we can actually turn to the most prominent source here, which was St. Jerome. St. Jerome wrote a book called *The Lives of Illustrious Men*, which I highly recommend you reading. You can actually find it online. There are copies of it and translations of it available for free. And in that book, what St. Jerome did is he gave little short biographical synopses of the lives and deaths of each of the apostles, as well as many of the figures from the Apostolic fathers and other writers of the early Church. In fact, Jerome begins his *Lives of Illustrious Men* with Saint Peter, and then he ends with himself. So he ends with the most recent illustrious man, namely himself, which he was, but he also had a little bit of a sense of humor, I think, in doing it that way. And so, in the first chapter of *The Lives of Illustrious Men*, this is how St. Jerome narrates the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul. So listen to these words. Jerome writes:

At [Nero's] hands [Peter] received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord... In the fourteenth year of Nero on the same day with Peter, [Paul] was beheaded at Rome for Christ's sake and was buried in the Ostian way, the twenty-seventh year after our Lord's passion.²

Okay, so you notice one of the things that Jerome gives witness to here is that Peter is crucified upside down because he's not worthy. He doesn't consider himself worthy to die in the same way that Jesus did. Paul is beheaded, and Jerome doesn't say this, but this would have been because he was a Roman citizen, and it was unlawful for Roman citizens to be crucified. That was considered the manner of execution for a slave. But Paul is a citizen, so he's decapitated instead. It's considered a more dignified form of death. And then, third, they both are executed in Rome. That's where they meet their end. And fourth, this is interesting, according to tradition, as reflected by Jerome, they meet that death on the same day. And that is partly why the Church picks one day to celebrate the martyrdom of two apostles. Right, so since ancient times, June 29th has been the feast, has been the day on which the Church celebrates the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome at the hands of Caesar Nero. These two great pillars, these two great foundation stones for the Church of Rome.

² Lives of Illustrious Men 1, 5; trans. NPNF.

And you can see how ancient this feast is actually by going back to the writings of Saint Augustine. So, Saint Augustine, who's writing in the late 4th or early 5th century, already in North Africa, he's writing in Hippo, reflects the fact that in North African churches, which were in communion with Rome, they followed the customs of the Church of Rome. And already by the late 4th or early 5th century, the feast of St. Peter and Paul's martyrdom, the solemnity was celebrated on June 29th, as we do today. So this is what it says, and I quote. Saint Augustine writes:

This day [June 29th] has been made holy by the martyrdom of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul. I am not here speaking of some unknown martyrs. "For their fame has penetrated every land and their message has reached the ends of the earth."

He's quoting one of the Psalms there.

These martyrs saw what they proclaimed... *One day is assigned for the celebration of the martyrdom of two apostles. But these two were one.* Although their martyrdom occurred on different days, they were one. Peter went first, Paul followed. We celebrate the feast day which is made sacred for us by the blood of these apostles. Let us love their faith, their life, their trials, their passion, their profession, their teaching.³

That's from Augustine's Sermons 295. It's actually quoted in the Liturgy of the Hours, so people who pray their hours will encounter this quotation. Now, you'll notice something there. According to St. Augustine, he doesn't seem to think that Peter and Paul are crucified on the exact same day, but that Peter's crucified first and that Paul is crucified later. It's not clear exactly whether he means they were both crucified on June 29th, and one was in one year and then the other was in the other year. It's a little bit ambiguous. Whereas Jerome seems to make it pretty clear that they're crucified on the same day. But despite these somewhat divergent traditions, it became quickly established in the early Church that there would be one day on which that martyrdom was celebrated, namely June 29th. And he describes here the fact that this day has been made holy. It's been sanctified by the blood of these two martyrs who, though very different, right? When we see Peter and Paul, they're very different figures. Peter goes primarily to the Jews, Paul goes to the Gentiles. Peter is a leader of the Twelve, Paul never even met Jesus. They

³ Augustine, *Sermon 295*, 1-2.4.7-8; in *The Divine Office*, Vol. III.

were very different figures. They even came into conflict at one point in the church at Antioch, as Paul describes in Galatians 2. But nevertheless, at the end of their lives and in their configuration to Christ crucified, these two are one. And therefore, we celebrate on this day, June 29th, the unity of these two great apostles on the Solemnity of the martyrdoms of St. Peter and Saint Paul.