

Saints Peter & Paul

Have you ever had a dream so vivid that it seemed real - so real that you found yourself acting out what you were doing in the dream? I am not a great one for dreams – a rarely remember even having one – but I do remember as a child sleep walking on one occasion and waking up in a cupboard. Some years ago one of our parishioners had a vivid dream that he was staying in a hotel. He got up during the night to go to the loo, and walked along the corridor. Unfortunately he was at home, and there was no corridor! He fell down the stairs and badly hurt himself.

In our first reading St Peter has an experience just like this. He was in prison, bound with double chains, and with guards at the prison entrance. An angel appears to him and wakes him. He touches the chains, which fall off. St Peter makes his way out of the prison – the gates opening of their own accord. It is like a dream. The difference is that when he wakes up it is all true. He finds himself on the street. It may have been like a dream, but God really had sent an angel to rescue him. This story appears in the first window on the right side of the Church at Kelvedon. St Peter has a special place in God's plan. Our Lord chose him to be the rock on which he would build his Church. Both he and St Paul would make their way independently to the city of Rome, the headquarters of the Roman Empire, in order to bring the Christian message to the heart of civil power and challenge the dominance of the Emperor over the realm of religion. St Peter is freed so he can fulfil his calling.

For the Romans politics and religion were inextricably mixed. The welfare of the state depended on due honour being given to the gods. From the time of Julius Caesar the Emperor was identified with this to the point of being called a god. People could worship whatever gods they liked, provided they also honoured the Emperor and the official Roman gods. The Jews refused to do this. The Romans had to tolerate this in the Holy Land, but the Emperor Claudius expelled them from Rome about the same time as he invaded Britain, and the earliest Christian martyrs in Rome date from this period. Both Jewish and Christian communities soon returned to Rome. The next serious persecution was to be under Claudius' successor Nero. It was in his reign that both St Peter and St Paul would give their lives as martyrs. According to tradition St Peter was crucified upside down, and St Paul beheaded with a sword.

Both are examples not only of human courage but the power of grace. St Peter overcame the fears that led him to deny Jesus at the time of the Crucifixion. St Paul was a man of conviction and determination but until he encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus he was one of the leading persecutors. Now he becomes a fearless defender of the Faith. He was beaten up on many occasions, and survived shipwreck on his way to be tried in Rome. He had opportunities to escape, but did not take them. St Peter takes the opportunity provided by the angel, but when his time comes, he stands firm, not out of natural boldness – after all he ran away when Jesus was arrested – but out of love, and because his faith and hope has now become as firm as a rock through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today we give thanks to God for the example of St Peter and St Paul. We ask for that same faith and hope and love that will enable us to stand up for what we believe in, knowing that the saints we honour today will not only encourage us by their example, but help us by the support of their prayers.