

## **SERMON**

28th June 2020

S Peter & S Paul

My life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. Apart from the birth of our seventh grandchild, the highlight of lockdown for me has been the daily offering of a full opera courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera of New York. This has given me an opportunity to revel in old favourites, and to 'dip a toe' into less familiar ones - and it gave me the freedom to give up on ones that did not appeal without costing me a penny.

I developed my own little game – listen to the overture or opening scene, and then flick to the very end of the opera and count the number of dead bodies on the stage! Except for comedies (obviously!) there was usually one fatality, as in *Madam Butterfly*, and sometimes the tragedy was racked up a degree or more by having two deaths as in *Tosca*. Imagine, then, my surprise when I tuned into Massenet's *Werther* to discover that within a couple of seconds of the curtain going up at the very start of the performance one of the actors fell down dead, and within the minute their coffin was carried out across the stage presumably to the local graveyard. Just for reassurance, I flicked to the end and found that *Werther* was expiring as the curtain finally came down!

Today's feast of Peter and Paul is rather like an opera with one death at the beginning and then two at the end. The story of the ministry of Peter and Paul begins with, and inspired by a death, and comes to its earthly conclusion with two deaths. The first is that of Jesus on the Cross, and the last two deaths their own martyrdom in Rome.

Traditionally we celebrate the two missions of the infant Church directed and led by these two giants of the faith: Peter commissioned to evangelise the Jewish people and Paul sent out as apostle to the Gentiles. But however diverse their own missionary endeavours were, both were based solidly on the fact of Jesus' death. And on Jesus' death, not as a tragedy but as a victory. To Jew and Gentile was proclaimed the same message, Christ died to save us from our sins – that was the universal Good News each man had at the centre of his activity.

Not only did they look back, as it were, to the beginning of their 'opera of good news', but also forward to the end of their lives, their expected martyrdom was a matter of joy and rejoicing too. In fact this death eagerly looked forward to was an essential element in each man's preaching. To be worthy of the name Christian, they said, we must take up our cross—not avoid it, nor kick it to one side out of sight. We must be ready to lose our lives for Christ's sake if we are to find them

Thus Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: When we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death . . . We went into the tomb with him and joined him in death. And Peter in his first letter writes in the same vein: Think of what Christ suffered in this life, and then arm yourselves with the same resolution that he had: anyone who in this life has bodily suffering has broken with sin.

Let's face it, it is not a very attractive rallying cry; it is not likely in this day of PR experts to meet with great enthusiasm, but we must remember that this was the authentic message of the earliest Christians. This is what attracted people to the Christian faith! From the very start, martyrdom was not only lauded as the highest of Christians vocations, it was actually embraced with affection and enthusiasm as a chance to live out that commitment to be one with Jesus in his death. Indeed, opposition and ridicule were to be expected as the early Christians stood up to be counted in the Jewish and Roman worlds in which they found themselves. There was no practical promise of an easy life with warm comfort and security guaranteed for those first adherents to the Christian faith. At the very least it was an uphill task they faced, willingly they placed themselves at a serious disadvantage—and they did it because they really believed, and were committed to, following Jesus on the way of the passion.

To show how persistent was this deep desire to embrace suffering and death, S Ambrose in the fourth century encouraged his baptism candidates (amongst them was S Augustine, of course) with these words. They were to think, he said, of the “death” that they had undergone in being immersed as a “sacrament of the cross”, which “fastened them to Christ” as Christ had been nailed to the cross. So he prayed that the nails would continue to hold the newly baptised, so that the devil could not drag them back into sin. Just think of that, the pains, the trials, the dangers of being a Christian are in fact the nails of the cross holding us safely beyond the grasp of the devil wanting to pull us back into sin. To cling to the cross, however painful that embrace may be, is our guarantee of protection in this world and our salvation in the next.

For too many Christians—and for us, most of the time, it has to be said—we want our faith to give us safety, protection and peace. There are even Christian sects, in America especially, which promise success in our family and business life if we live a faithful life and contribute generously to the Church's funds.

Those Peter and Paul would have been horrified to think that God's protection could be gained in such a selfish and mercenary way. If you wanted those kinds of guarantees, they would have said, try the mystery cults with their arcane

formulae and secret rituals. The Christian faith right from day one was all about embracing the Cross.

Whenever we are tempted to cry out as we hit a minor catastrophe, 'why has this happened to me?' perhaps we should pray to ask God 'why has nothing worse ever happened to me?' If we are to take up our cross and follow him, if we are to believe that our baptism was truly into his death, then the path of suffering that life deals for us ought to be a path of joy, privileged to share in the passion of Jesus.

Peter and Paul both based their messages on the Good News of the death of Christ – and encouraged their hearers themselves to embrace Jesus' cross in their own lives, and their deaths as dying joyfully in the Lord. May we feel in our difficulties this week the nails of Jesus's cross, and may we rejoice that by being pinned to his cross we are in the safest embrace to protect us from the evil one, and spiritually speaking are set in the right direction to face our own eventual deaths. That is the best way we can honour Peter and Paul.