

Saints Peter and Paul

(2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18 / Matthew 16:13-19)

29.06.2014

Today we celebrate the two great apostles, sometimes referred to as *the pillars* (or the columns) of *the Church*, Saint Peter and Saint Paul.

This image of a pillar or a column speaks to us of strength.

Let's just qualify what strength, or rather, whose strength, we are talking about when we consider the testimony of SS Peter and Paul.

Peter and Paul were led to realise that they were not strong of themselves.

The testimony of both these men is that it was God's strength that was made manifest in and through their human weakness.

If at the outset of their lives Peter and Paul imagined themselves to be strong men, through the experience of life, they came to realise that of themselves they weren't really strong at all.

They came to understand that relying on their own strength alone, they could do nothing.

Mind you, it took them a while to grasp this.

In a sense they were both slow learners.

I expect the same is true for many of us.

It often takes us quite a while to grasp that of ourselves *we* can do nothing.

As I say that, words spoken by Jesus in St John's gospel, words which He applied to Himself, come to mind: *Of myself, I can do nothing. I can do nothing except that which the Father gives me to accomplish.*

These words spoken by Jesus Peter and Paul could make their own, just as we can and should make them our own: of ourselves, relying on our own strength alone, *we* can do nothing!

How did Peter and Paul both come to the realisation they arrived at?

Well, primarily through the experience of the pain of disappointment in their lives.

There were things both Peter and Paul tried to accomplish alone and in regard to which they failed.

This led them to realise they couldn't accomplish anything good and lasting without God's help to sustain and uphold them.

Often this is how it works in our lives too.

Frequently, it is the pain of disappointment – our disappointment with ourselves, our humiliation rooted in frequent failures and constant falls – that leads us to the humbling realisation that we are not all-powerful beings.

Our life experiences teach us what both Peter and Paul came to realise as true for themselves: namely, that we are weak and powerless people.

It is vital that we realise and admit to the fact that we are, as the psalmist reminds us, men and women who are *poor and needy*.

Both Peter and Paul lived for quite a while under the illusion that they could do great things for the Lord, and, indeed, were doing great things for Him.

Both lived for quite a while armed with a deep personal conviction that they were pleasing God when in fact all they were doing was serving their own *ego*.

How easily we can all fall into that trap!

So much of the supposed good people accomplish is in fact done only to serve and feed their own *ego*; frequently, without our being conscious of it, so much of the supposed good we accomplish is

done only to serve our own *ego*.

Both Peter and Paul confused their sense of self-righteousness with holiness and their personal achievements with God's glory.

We can all do that.

Paul's opening of his heart to his young protégé Timothy (we heard an extract from that in today's first reading) bears testimony to the fact that eventually he came to see, through the painful experiences of life, that the Christian way is a self-emptying process, a sharing in Christ's *kenosis*, and an on-going spiritual combat.

Paul speaks in terms of his life *being poured out as a libation* and he goes on to talk of his having *fought the good fight*.

The verses we read this morning in Second Timothy are filled with great realism, as are all Paul's self-reflective, self-assessing testimonials.

In what he shares from his own lived experience, Paul makes clear what we all know from ours: namely, the Christian way is not an easy path to walk.

Paul doesn't hide the fact that a long struggle is involved in living the Christian life.

He makes it clear that the Christian way is not a path devoid of suffering and pain – as we might like to think it is, or, at least, should be.

Now, I find Paul's honesty in what we read this morning, and in so many other passages from his letters, greatly liberating.

I find it consoling that the apostle dares to admit to his constant struggles.

I find Paul's honesty in regard to his difficulties not at all depressing, but uplifting, in fact.

Paul's honest sharing is a source of encouragement for us.

Just imagine how disappointed with ourselves and how lost we would be feeling if the apostle was constantly telling us that the Christian life is an easy path to follow!

We would surely be left thinking that we must be getting something wrong along the way; that there must something wrong with us, every time trouble, sorrow, pain or ill visit us.

If Paul were to have told us that the Christian life is an easy ride, then every time we encounter suffering, we would be left to conclude that this must a sign that we are not living our life properly and not experiencing authentic Christianity.

Understand me.

I am not advocating that we should be seeking out pain for pain's sake or making ourselves suffer in in order to be authentic Christians. Such an approach would be unhealthy and unholy.

Nor am I denying that the Christian way is *a path of life* and, as such, is a path strewn with many blessings.

I have no doubt that the Christian life is a life of extraordinary grace and blessing.

But it is not a way of blessings without the cross.

Significantly when we bless ourselves and/or when we bless others we do so using the sign of the cross.

All this to say that one quickly realises how foolish both Peter and Paul were – and how foolish we can sometimes be – to imagine that the Christian life could ever be lived relying on one's own strength alone.

Of ourselves, we are powerless.

We need God's help.

That said, I suspect many of us feel uncomfortable with having to admit to our powerlessness. We may fear that this admission leaves us with no other option than just to give up. It may look to us as if it makes no sense to admit to our powerlessness and yet somehow still find the strength to go on.

We might well ask: how can a powerless person fight the good fight?

For the apostle Paul life is full of paradoxes. He tells us at one point: *It is when I am weak that I am strong.*

You may recall what Paul shared with the Corinthians and the context in which he stated this. Writing to the Corinthians Paul expressed not only an abstract conviction, but rather shared what his lived experience had been. He listed just some of the trials he had been through in life. What a story that was!

Among the words he wrote there I retain the following lines as an illustration of how he assessed himself in all this: *The precious treasure we carry – the light and power that now shine within us – is held in a fragile container, that is, our weak bodies. Everyone can see in this way that the glorious power within us must be from God and is not our own.*

Clearly, Paul saw himself as a fragile being. He made the point that as human beings we all have inherent weaknesses.

We are *perishable containers*, just *clay pots* ...

But we *carry a treasure within*.

This treasure, the very life of God, is *power from on high* (the Holy Spirit) which is given to us precisely when we need it most: in our weakness!

What a liberating discovery this is!

Once we recognise the paradox of powerlessness this can be quite a relief.

It leaves us that we don't always have to pretend to be strong or always pretend to be perfect.

We can live our real life, with its daily struggles, in the human body which is ours: a body beset with physical weaknesses.

We can dare to face up to the fact that we have a psyche which may be disturbed and leave us feeling fragile sometimes

We can dare to admit to our emotional ups and downs, our affective needs, which leave us feeling so vulnerable, our anxieties, our doubts, our fears.

These are all things Paul was courageous enough to name for us in his writings and these are all things that we see coming into play in Peter's life.

Once we recognise the paradox of powerlessness we can accept ourselves as we are: fallen men and women, who by God's grace and love can always get up and begin again, as Peter did after his post-resurrection encounter with Jesus on the shores of the lake. You may recall that gospel scene in chapter 21 of John's gospel. On that Easter morning we see Jesus prepare breakfast for Simon on the shore and we hear him reassure the apostle who betrayed Jesus out of fear that his poor, weak, fragile love is all that is required of him for the mission already confided to him to be renewed once more.

From our reading of the New Testament we come to see how both Peter and Paul came to realise the value of their self disappointments.

Both even came to *thank God* for their weaknesses.

Paul is very explicit about this in his writings. He doesn't hesitate to offer thanksgiving for the

difficult passages he encountered along life's way.  
Peter's approach in his letters is of a similar vein.

I find the example of the apostles here to be an encouragement for each one of us today.

For, in each of us there are – there always will be – weaknesses holding us back, tendencies which derail us ... in each one of us there will be burdens that weigh upon us, issues in which we can become totally bogged down.

The important lesson taught to us by Peter and Paul, as much by the example they gave as through the words they wrote, is that weaknesses too have a purpose, for they serve to bring us to God and lead us to rely upon His strength with confidence and trust.

The apostles do not hide the fact from us that life is tough, but they comfort us greatly too.

*Peter tells us: Now we live in the hope of eternal life because Christ is risen from the dead. And God has reserved for us His children the priceless gift of eternal life; it is kept in heaven for you ... And God in His mighty power, will make sure that you get there to receive it because you are trusting in Him. It will be yours ... So be truly glad! Rejoice! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though the going is rough for a while down here!*

*Paul for his part encourages us with these words: Since we are God's children, we will share His treasures – for all God gives to His Son Jesus is now ours too. But if we are to share His glory, we must also share His suffering. Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory He will give us later. For all creation is waiting patiently and hopefully for that future day when God will resurrect His children.*

*He goes on to say: The day will come when thorns and thistles, sin, death and decay – the things that overcome the world against its will at God's command – will all disappear, and the world around us (and us in it) will share in the glorious freedom from sin which God's children enjoy.*

It seems to me that both Peter and Paul illustrate a truth iterated by Jean Vanier when we said: *our growth begins the day we can accept our own weakness.*

Perhaps that is another way of saying what I have been seeking to convey through this morning's reflection: we only start to tap into and allow God's strength to be deployed through us when we humbly recognise and readily admit to our weakness.

Just as this was a turning point in the lives of both Peter and Paul, so it can become a turning point in our lives.

Amen!