

Saints Peter and Paul
(2 Timothy 4:6-8.17-18 / Matthew 16:13-19)
29.06.2015

The reading of today's gospel passage has me think of a poem I discovered within the past year. It would be truer to say, a poem I was introduced to within the past year. The reading of this poem touched me deeply. It had a profound impact upon me that has marked me ever since.

I refer to Sansom's poem entitled *Peter*.

In the poem *Peter* the poet has Simon Peter recount something of his experience of Jesus to Mark, the evangelist. (Mark is often thought of and referred to as Peter's secretary or 'porte-parole', his spokesperson. He is depicted by Sansom as having been invited by Peter *to set his scroll aside* for a while, so that he might simply *listen* and even *see* what Peter has to share with him.)

In the poem *Peter* there lots of things with which many of us who are here today could identify.

This morning I propose that we give special consideration to lines of thought in the poem that I am convinced can and will speak to all of us.

Having had Peter state to Mark that he *would remember and re-live what happened on the road to Caesarea Philippi* (today's gospel scene), Sansom puts these words into Peter's mouth: *Oh, Mark, men have their moments (Caesarea Philippi) That was mine.*

It is so true, is it not?
All men (and women) have their moments.

I am thinking of those graced moments of our lives which live on in our hearts forever.

That moment may be the day we encountered our future spouse, or made our monastic profession or were ordained to ministry. It may be a graced moment shared with a person we care for, or the first kiss we exchanged with the love of our life. It may be the day we were listening to a sermon or reading a Scripture passage and God's word jumped out at us and spoke deeply into a hearts. It may an occasion when something someone said spoke to us in a way that totally transformed our lives, our outlook, our way of being. It may be a time when we were given a particular spiritual insight or intuition.

Yes, *all men (and women) have their moments.*

In certain concentrated moments something happens that leaves us never quite the same again.

I have a particular fondness for a meditative song entitled *He touched me*.
(I heard this song sung in Protestant Charismatic Renewal circles in the 1970's.)
It states: *Something happened. I'm sure, I know. He touched me and made me whole.*

Could I suggest that today we remember some of our graced moments of encounter with Jesus?
It is good for us to recall these meetings with Christ's love in our lives.

Perhaps they came at a high point in our lives or perhaps they came when we were at a particularly low ebb.
Most of us will remember both.

We will usually recall how Christ manifested Himself at both high points and low ebb moments along life's way.

The important thing to remember is what the Lord will have revealed to us on those occasions: His love.

Love is always what is revealed to us when we meet with the Lord, for love is who God is in Himself!

Maybe at our time of meeting with the Lord we felt strong (as Peter did at Caesarea Philippi) when he was given to confess Jesus to be *the Christ* and, in Jesus' response, heard himself called *the rock* in return.

Or maybe in our graced encounter with the Lord all we could do was to recognise ourselves to be a *sinful being*. (That was what happened in the story of the miraculous catch in Luke 5, where Peter said: *Lord be gone from me for I am a sinful man.*)

Or again, it may have been that we encountered the Lord when we were shrouded in disappointment with ourselves and covered with shame and yet the Lord came to us at that moment, like a mendicant, begging for our love. (Such was the case on the lake shore in that post-resurrection encounter between Jesus and Peter recorded in John 21. Jesus' thrice posed question *Do you love me?* undoubtedly led Peter to recall his having denied the Lord three times).

Through the ups and downs of life it is vital that we remember the graces received and the blessings already bestowed upon us. We should recall that the Lord will never retract what He has freely given.

The poet Sansom has Peter share with Mark, after his mention of *that moment which was his* and in which he had *heard the phrase he had lived for: Since then I have betrayed it - doubted, denied. Deserted him. But always Those words return ... More powerful than before. For* (and here is a line I feel it so important for all of us to hear today): *For, he saw me, not as I was, but as I might become.*

Our looking back is about drawing strength for the journey ahead.

It is about looking at the road already travelled in the sure and certain hope that even better things lie ahead of us. The Lord holds them in store for us. They are yet to come.

There is something extraordinarily comforting in the thought that the Lord sees us as we might yet become.

Is that the way we think of God looking upon us?

Is this how we dare to look upon ourselves?

I am afraid that sometimes all we manage, as we look back, is to review the past with regret. So often we fail to look forward in hope as we review the past.

Our looking back should not be allowed to have a disheartening hold upon us.

Rather, it should be lived as an encouragement to help us find fresh vigour to move forward.

We find this train of thought in the writings of the other great Apostle Paul whom we also celebrate on this day.

Writing to the Philippians, Paul explained that he looked back so as to strain forward.

With the confidence both apostles show in regard to their future with God, or rather in regard to God's vision for their future, Peter and Paul witness strongly to the great Christian virtue of hope.

This is the grace I suggest that we dare to ask for ourselves today, and that we also ask for each other, as we gather here in community: the grace of hope!

Pope Francis has taken up this idea in his *Letter for Consecrated Men and Women*, building upon the thought contained in the writings of St John-Paul II to Religious.

Both John-Paul's Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* and Francis' *Letter to All Consecrated People* call upon us to remember with gratitude the gifts and graces of the past, not only looking forward to the future with hope, but *already*, here and now, *before we see the accomplishment of the Lord's promises to us, daring to be filled with gratitude for the gifts of grace and light with which the Lord graciously wills to enrich us in the future.*

It is in *holy hope* that we are called to live!

This is the call I feel compelled to echo once again today: the call to live in *holy hope*.

This is part of our heritage as monks who trace their origins back through Bec to *Le Monastère de la Sainte Espérance* at Mesnil St Loup.

Writing to the Romans (in chapter 15 of that epistle) Paul speaks of our God as *the God of hope*.

In this same epistle (again chapter 15) Paul defines and explains hope for us, presenting it as *a gift to be received and tended to.*

Earlier on in the same letter (in chapter 5) the apostle makes this extraordinary claim: *Hope never disappoints.*

So, while Paul is known primarily as *the apostle of grace and faith* (a title given to him), I believe we can say that the message of hope is also central to his teaching.

For Paul it is hope that leads to our experience of love being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us.

If hope is emphasised in Paul's writings, as we have seen, it is true to say that it is probably Peter who is best described as *the apostle of hope*. (This is a title given to him.)

Someone has commented: *The life circumstances of Peter made him best suited to being God's messenger of hope.*

Those words ring true.

In his first epistle Peter refers to *the living hope given through Christ*. If Peter speaks this way it is because he experienced this to be true in his own life.

What Peter learned throughout his life, and what he so ably shares with us in his first epistle, is that *hope is alive when you live with Christ.*

The Peter who wrote those words had experienced that even when one fails and falls, even when one *blows it really badly*, there is always hope in Jesus!

Peter rejoiced in this hope and kept hope going, even when he failed.

Surely this explains his words in the opening section of his First Letter with which I will draw this reflection to a close. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.*

Today, as we celebrate the author of those words, may we be begotten again!

That is what our memory of God's graciousness in the past should do for us. It should make us re-live what we recall!

We have all had our moments.
Let us remember them with gratitude.

Our memory of past blessings should lead us to re-connect with the One whom we recall: Christ-Jesus, risen from the dead, the source and end of our lives, the One from whom all blessings flow!

Memory of the past is what we resort to in order to rekindle hope for the future.

As we have already heard, Paul reminds us: *And this hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.*