

St Peter & St Paul

(2 Timothy 4:6-8.17-18 / Matthew 16:13-19)

29.06.2020

Wouldn't it be great if at the end of our lives we could make our words similar to those heard in 2 Timothy 4 (the text read in the first reading of this liturgy)? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could be as strong in our faith, as sure in our hope, as confident in our love, as Paul demonstrated himself to have been in those lines which he penned as he neared the end of his years of loving service and faithful ministry?

I expect that Timothy, whom Paul referred to as *a beloved son in the Lord*, would have received Paul's words as a sort of *Last Testament* from a loving *father in Christ*; an encouragement to him as he committed himself to live out the vocation to loving service and faithful ministry to which Paul had initiated him.

If we were to think of how we have received the final words relayed to us by particularly important figures in our own life stories, I think we might better appreciate the frame of heart and mind with which Timothy surely welcomed Paul's words and the significance their message took on for him. Some of us, at least, will recall how we strained our ears to listen to the last whispered words of a loved one who was about to take leave of us. Others among us will realise that even if their loved one was taken away from them by a surprise death, they will have spontaneously found themselves led to reconsider the final exchanges they enjoyed with that person and will have started to read a significance into things that were said or shared at that moment. When someone is no longer with us we are inclined to give great importance to what was last said between us and to interpret it in ways that give it an enduring significance. An example of this. I was at a funeral last week and one person there reminisced with me over the last exchanges by telephone and lines that were written at the time of a recent significant birthday with the person who had died. He had come to see the deceased person's words as nothing less than his parting instructions to him; an encouragement for to get on with his life when the person whose funeral we were celebrating together would no longer be here on earth. Many of us, like that man, will be treasuring a message of comfort, a word of advice, a gesture of encouragement given to us; a blessing pronounced over us; a saying of enduring wisdom which still accompanies us. Even if we do not think of these things at every moment, they may well arise at key moments in our lives. When they do so, frequently they help us make sense out of happenings that become part of our story along the way.

If the lines we heard in today's first reading were of special significance to Timothy, because of his unique relationship with Paul, I am sure that all who are called to pursue the apostolic ministry in the Church today can also learn much from them and be greatly encouraged by them. I have just spoken of *those called to exercise the apostolic ministry in the Church today*. Let me qualify that statement. While it is true that in our Catholic tradition we believe that it is the Bishops of the Church who exercise the apostolic ministry in a very specific way, it is important for us to remember that every disciple is called to be an apostle. From the outset, the apostolic ministry was not confined exclusively to the group of the Twelve and those whom they designated to come after them in the Church's emerging structures. Indeed, the first apostle to bear witness to the resurrection (which is at the core of all apostolic ministry) was a woman: Mary of Magdala. She was sent by the Risen Lord Himself to tell His brothers (the remaining members of the Twelve) that Christ had risen and would appear to them in Galilee. For this reason, she is hailed as *the Apostle to the Apostles*.

In the lines he penned to Timothy, Paul promises all of us the Lord's grace for the apostolic ministry which is confided to us. In these words Paul shared his own experience with his beloved son in the Lord. Paul's experience was that the power of God was made manifest in his human weakness during all the time he poured out his life like a libation for the good of the Church. Paul shared his experience of the Christ's proximity to him in and through everything he traversed when he stated simply: *The Lord stood by me*. That God's strength had been made manifest to the apostle Paul in his human weakness is something he came back to again and again in his writings – not only to Timothy, but to whole Church communities. I think specifically of his testimony in this respect in his Letters to the Churches in Corinth, Galatia and Rome. God's strength at work in human weakness is a central theme in Paul's writings.

What helped Paul throughout his years of Christian witness was the fact that he had developed an intimate relationship with Jesus – a relationship which was so intimate that Paul could say that his life was *in Christ* and *Christ lived in him*. It is in such a close relationship with the Lord that we are called to live our lives, to the point where we can say: *Jesus Christ, You are my life!* Even more than to simply content ourselves to make such a declaration we must be seen to incarnate this truth. Jesus Christ must be seen to be our life! Seeing us, others should be able to recognise *Christ living in us*.

If I find it encouraging for us today to hear Paul's words to Timothy, more important still, I believe, is for us to dare to apply those words to our lives, daring to make them our own.

If Paul was approaching the end of his life when he wrote to Timothy, we should remember that his end had not yet come and so, in the final lines of his text, Paul called upon his beloved son in the Lord to look to the future with hope.

I hear a call addressed to us today to dare to believe, as Paul did, and as he invited Timothy to believe, that the Lord will come through for us in everything that is asked of us to accomplish, in all that we may yet be led to confront and have to work our way through.

If our Pauline text looks to the future with trust in God, so too does the Petrine text – or rather the text concerning Peter – heard in today's Gospel passage.

In the lines from Matthew's Gospel read this morning, we hear Jesus give Peter the assurance that He will be with him and with the Church in time to come – including, and especially, during the hard times announced, when the power of hell will be unleashed against the Church. Pope Francis is on record as having said that the moment in history we are traversing right now is such a time. It is precisely at difficult passages such as those which we are going through as Church at this period in history that we are invited to trust in the Lord. The call to have confidence in God comes from the Lord Jesus Himself. We can have confidence in Christ, knowing that He is faithful to His word. God will never abandon or forsake us. We may well disappoint the Lord; He will not disappoint us. We may well make promises that we will not manage to keep, but the Lord will always remain faithful to His promises in our regard.

The fact that Peter failed and fell, the fact that he was flawed and had his faults, did not detract from the love the Lord held for him in His heart, nor did it take away from the confidence the Lord placed in him and continued to show to him.

Thinking of Peter, I cannot help but recall those wonderfully affirming words spoken to him by Jesus in chapter 22 of Luke's Gospel, wherein Jesus recognised Peter's weakness and foretold his fall... and yet made it clear that He would remain with the apostle and lift him up again after he had fallen: *Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to have you, to sift you like wheat,*

*but I have pleaded for you that your faith should not completely fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen and build up the faith of your brothers.*

Like Peter, we are called to affirm our brothers and sisters in the Church and to do this by the testimony of our commitment to Christ – a commitment which may wane at times, but which can always be renewed.

The fact that Peter was told by Jesus that he would falter and fall, that he would deny ever having known Him – despite his bold declaration that while all others might fail, he would never do so – brings home to us the realistic assessment the Lord makes of us, compared to the unrealistic assessments we are inclined to make of ourselves.

Our compassionate Lord knows how weak and fragile we are; He realises how fickle we can be. We should be encouraged by this, not to give licence to or justify our failings, as some are wont to do, but to keep us grounded in humility.

God's forgiveness is there for us all.

Those who are flawed and have failed, with the help of faithfulness, can be renewed through the forgiving power of Christ. They can be restored and renewed to help others find the restoration and renewal of their lives. They will then be able to help others, as Peter did, by sharing with them their own experience of God's mercy. Peter's testimony in this regard is striking. In 1 Peter 4, for example, we find an encouragement to show love, even after we have sinned, in the assurance that such love will cover a multitude of sins; while in 2 Peter 1 the apostle proclaims that, delivered from an old life of sin, we can be led to live a strong, good life in the Lord which builds others up and positively impacts those who might be tempted to stumble or fall away.

All in all, today's Solemnity of the apostles Peter and Paul offers us great encouragement in our weakness. It displays for us a great truth that is affirmed by the Church's liturgy in the celebration of martyrs of the faith: namely, that *it is the Lord's way to choose the weak and make them strong in bearing witness to Him.*

Amen!