

St Peter and St Paul 27th June 2010

Well, today we celebrate the feast of the two greatest saints of the Christian Church – St Peter and St Paul.

And as we do, we celebrate the patronal festival of our church here in Farningham.

There is much that we learn from these two great saints, but this morning I wanted to look at just three of their passions, and see how we might apply *their* passions to *our* lives today.

So today I would like to spend a little time thinking about Peter and Paul's passion for Jesus, their passion for people and their passion for Jesus' power.

Firstly, their passion for Jesus.

And who can doubt that both Peter and Paul were totally passionate about their Lord and saviour.

One of the most exciting stories of the gospels is surely Peter hanging over the side of a fishing boat, imploring Jesus to let him walk across the water to be with him (Matthew 14.22-33).

And surely one of the most moving stories in the gospels contains Peter's denial of Jesus, the cock crowing and the eyes of Peter and Jesus meeting as Peter realises just what he has done to the person he loves above all others (Luke 22.61)

Paul talks of his passion for Jesus in Philippians 3.8, when he says "I count all things loss (rubbish, garbage) compared to the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord."

And here then lies the first challenge for us from these great saints:
Are we passionate about Jesus?

Passion gets a bad press in the Church.

Certainly in the past, religion has generally been viewed as a good thing, but like alcohol and cream cakes only in moderation.

After all, we are British. We do moderation.

And we *don't* do emotions.

Or do we?

On Wednesday John and I went to watch the cricket at Beckenham, and as we got off the train we walked past a pub showing the England football match.

No lack of passion or emotion there!

Even at the cricket, of all places, people were cheering and shouting and getting involved.

The truth is, isn't it, that we all get passionate about the things that are important to us; be it family, politics, gardening, or sport.

We do give our time and efforts and money to these things.

We talk about them with "evangelical zeal".

And we get excited about them and even express our emotions.

And if, like Peter and Paul, we love Jesus, above all other things, then surely we will break free from the shackles of our repressed Englishness and allow ourselves to become just a little bit excited, or even passionate, about the Jesus who loves us, who died for us, who accompanies us through life's journey and who ensures our place in heaven.

The second thing we might learn from Saint Peter and Saint Paul is from their passion for people.

In 1 Corinthians 9.20-23 Paul writes:

"To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the Law I became as one under the law (although I am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the Law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I might by any means save some."

People matter.

Each and every human being on this planet is made by God, in his image.

Each and every human being on this planet is loved by God.

Jesus has died for each and every human being on this planet.

And so people's physical needs matter – we might think of the many people who were physically ill, or even dead, who Peter and Paul prayed for and healed.

And people's spiritual needs matter.

Without a relationship with God through Jesus, people are alienated from the God who made and loves them, they are living a less than fully human life, and they face a lost eternity.

Peter and Paul were passionate about meeting peoples' physical needs; as well as their healing, we might think about the collection Paul organised for the poor Christians in Jerusalem during a time of famine (1 Corinthians 16.1-4).

But they also had an over-riding concern for sharing the good news of Jesus, and helping people find a relationship with God through Jesus Christ (see Acts 2 for how Peter got started).

Here then lies the second challenge for us as a church.

Are we passionate about people?

Are we passionate enough about each and every person God made and loves to go out of our comfort zones and yes, be concerned for their physical wellbeing, but also for their spiritual wellbeing?

Are we a church that shares the good news of Jesus?

We need, as a Church, to face facts.

In 1950, 50% of the nation's children attended Sunday school. In 2010, this figure has dropped to about 4%.

We live in a society that has largely turned its back of the Christian faith.

But we live in a society that desperately needs Jesus; and is often open to spiritual things.

And evidence shows that where Christians and Churches are creative and relevant in their sharing of Jesus, people do become Christians and churches do grow.

The third passion of Peter and Paul that I want to mention this morning, then, is their passion for power.

Let me tell you two stories.

The first is of a beach, where after a high tide, thousands upon thousands of star fish had been washed up and lay dying.

A man watched as a small boy picked these star fish up, one by one, and threw them back into the sea.

After a while, the man said to the boy, "why bother? There are so many star fish, what difference can you possibly make?"

The boy simply picked up another star fish, threw it back into the sea, and said, "I bet I've made a difference to that one."

We can all make a difference.

But if we want to make a real difference, we need the power of Jesus.

At a meeting of the healing group this week, Sarah told us a story of a dream that a man called Mike Endicott had had.

He dreamt he was in a small boat, drifting down a river, and seeing the parched dying plants on the river bank, he started to scoop water from the river onto the plants.

Having made little difference, he went back to a boat house and got into a speed boat, and raced down the river. The wake from the boat showered all the plants with water, and the plants were saved.

Peter and Paul were passionate about power, not for their own sake, or to serve their own ends, but so that they might be effective in their work for Jesus.

And their power came not from physical strength, or even being gifted speakers. (Paul describes himself as coming to Corinth without any of these things – 1 Corinthians 2.1-5)

No, the power that they exercised came from the power of the Spirit at work through them, and this based on prayer and sound doctrine.

We find that Peter's stepping beyond the bounds of Judaism to share the gospel with Gentiles is a direct result of time spent in prayer (Acts 10) and a vision from God.

St Paul writes in Ephesians 6.10-20 about the spiritual battle all Christians are involved in, and how the only way to win through in that battle is through prayer.

Many of Paul's letters themselves contain prayers for the church he is writing to (eg Colossians 1.9-14).

And of course, both Peter and Paul wrote letters to the Churches they oversaw, or in Paul's case also to other church leaders, teaching them true and sound Christian doctrine.

Sound Christian doctrine is something very much under attack in our day and age.

We live in a society that values free thinking, searching for your own truth, and in effect 'anything goes'.

Within the church Christian doctrine that has formed the bedrock of Christian belief for 2,000 years is jettisoned in the name of cultural relevance and enlightened thinking.

But in the writing of Peter and Paul, and the other writers of God inspired Scripture, we find good doctrine based on the truth of God.

Without it we are all at sea,
And powerless to make any difference to others.

Was it not Jesus himself who said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (John 8.32)

As Christians we are rightfully wary of power. Power has an ability to corrupt. And the Jesus we follow came not rule by force, but serve and capture men’s hearts by love.

We must do the same.

But to do so, to be effective, we must allow the power of Jesus to work through us; and prayer and sound doctrine will go a long way in allowing this to happen.

Saint Peter and Saint Paul:

Passionate about Jesus – are we?

Passionate about people – are we?

And passionate for the power of Jesus to change lives and communities – are we?

Let us pray –

Lord Jesus, as your servants Peter and Paul were passionate about you, give us a passion for you too.

As Peter and Paul were passionate for people, give us a passion for people too.

And as Peter and Paul were passionate for your power to be at work through them, use us powerfully too.

To the praise and glory of your name, Amen.