

"The Faith of Peter and Paul"

Homily of June 29, 2003

by Fr. Gerry Murphy

A few nights ago I was out with a group of friends. During the course of the evening our conversation turned to the subject of cemeteries, tombstones and what it costs to get buried these days. One question that we all had a lot of fun with was: if you were to have an epitaph inscribed on your tombstone, what would it be? Well, the answers in the group ranged from, 'I did it my way,' and 'Like the phoenix, I will rise again,' to 'Mom always burned the toast!' But seriously, in terms of how we have lived our faith in God over the span of our lives, what might the wording of our epitaph be? Worth pondering on.

Paul, in his second letter to Timothy, in the light of his impending martyrdom, reviews his lifelong journey of faith and conversion. And in doing so, he compiles, what to my mind are some beautiful and striking epitaphs: 'I have competed well,' 'I have finished the race,' 'I have kept the faith,' and 'The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.' Certainly these one-line epitaphs speak of the many challenges and points of growth that characterize Paul's journey of faith and conversion. Paul is aware that he has been faithful to his calling, a calling which has involved major moments of conversion. More importantly he knows he has been empowered to preach by God. In times of darkness and confusion, suffering and persecution, he knows in his heart that God has stood by him and rescued him. Betrayal becomes the opportunity for a new beginning; weaknesses are an opportunity to trust more completely in the power of God. And so in Paul, we have a wonderful and inspiring example of how God works in, and transforms the lives of those he has chosen for particular tasks.

And what is the lesson in Paul's life for us? God is continuously at work in each of our lives. Moments of difficulty, darkness and confusion provide opportunities to grow in understanding of the mystery of God's cross and resurrection. Now this kind of spirituality might be a hard sell to someone who has just lost a loved one in tragic or violent circumstances, or to someone who has been kicked around and abused all her life. However, for the one who can hold on in faith and trust, the message of Paul's letter to Timothy is clear: the values of Christ are shown in the lives of those who are poor in spirit, meek, hunger and thirst for justice, build peace and are ready to suffer for the sake of the Gospel message.

And what of the other great apostle that we honor on this feast day, St. Peter? What can we say about him? What can we learn from the testimony of his life? Well here we have a simple fisherman from provincial Galilee, a compulsive man, always ready with an answer. His audacity did not prevent him from denying Jesus, but his sorrow and love of Jesus restored him to become the shepherd of Jesus' followers. But how often

Peter must have wondered why God had called him for this task. And how often he misunderstood the words and actions of Jesus. And how painful must have been the memories of the night of betrayal when he denied that he knew Jesus. With deep sadness he must have remembered that eventful moment when he sat warming himself in the courtyard during Jesus' trial. Yet this betrayal was not an end but the beginning of a deeper and transformed relationship with Jesus.

I think in the case of both Peter and Paul, we have a wonderful illustration of the human quest for meaning and understanding. The lives of Paul and Peter show how they often misunderstood God's plan and only in time became faithful followers. At times our faith is severely put to the test, and at times it is found wanting. At times we don't understand what God is asking of us. At times the burdens and crosses in our lives are almost too much to bear. And at times we say to ourselves: 'Surely there has to be more to my life than what I am presently living.'

And the end of the day faith is simply and purely a gift from God. It is not a human opinion, or a sentimental attachment. Nor is it about emotion or a continuous feeling of well-being. The gift of faith we have each received in and through the tradition and teachings of our church, sets us on a quest for ever deeper meaning and understanding in how we live in relation to God, to others and to all of creation. As individuals, as a church and as a human community, we are called, like the two great apostles we honor today, to live a faith-filled life in a spirit of openness and ongoing conversion. If we do this, then like Paul, we can rightfully suggest that our epitaph read: 'I have kept the faith.'