

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Wednesday, June 29, 2022

The Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul

Solemn Eucharist

5:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

2 Timothy 4:1-8, 17-18; Matthew 16:13-19

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‘Do not be afraid of death. Peter will lead you to Christ, who is life.’

A few weeks ago, a number of us were on pilgrimage in the Holy Land, and we found ourselves at Caesarea Philippi – not far from the Golan Heights - the very place mentioned in today’s Gospel Reading. I guess I had never, ever, looked closely at a map of the area, let alone photographs. Even though I knew the Gospel passage so well, I have to say that all of us – including the Bishop of Tennessee – were unprepared for what we saw. After a bit of a hike, we heard the sound of rushing water, getting louder and louder and then, as we turned a corner, there was this amazing torrent of beautiful, crystal-clear water gushing from the mountainside. It is one of the main sources of the River Jordan. We climbed up to the source, and there we discovered the ruins of an ancient Greek Temple complex dedicated to the god Pan, once famous for its dancing goats, Pan’s consort Echo, and Pan’s father, Hermes. The Temple to honor Pan was constructed some 200 years before Christ’s birth, but some shrines are dated to the second century *after* Christ which indicates how popular and active a temple complex it was. The Emperor Caesar Augustus gave the area as a gift to King Herod the Great who built another Temple there in his honor. There was a thriving and bustling city around the Temple complex, so important that King Agrippa, some years later, made it his capital city, a city that remained until Crusader times so, when Jesus visited, there must have been crowds of people and a very active cult of Pan at the temple. The temple is built at the source of the Jordan where there is a huge cave with water incredibly, and dangerously, deep; so deep that the Greeks thought that it was connected to the underworld and the River Styx itself, which explains the name of the cave – ‘The gates of hell’ or Hades. Sacrifices were offered in this cave, animals and possibly humans were hurled into the mouth of the cave and into the deep.

It is there, with a temple in honor of imperial military and political power dedicated to the Roman Emperor, and a temple dedicated to the god of life and fertility, next to the entrance to Hades – a symbol of death - that Jesus asked his disciples a question, “Who do people say that I am?”

I have to say that, I always known that the reference to Peter as the rock related to his foundational faith when he recognized Jesus as Lord, as Messiah, as the Christ. The two Greek words in that sentence, after all, come from the same root – Peter or *Petros* and rock or *petra* - but until I had seen the vast cave known as the Gates of Hades, and the huge stones of the temple complex, and the gushing water coming from the mountain, I had never truly understood the significance of this exchange, and why Jesus had chosen to ask the question in that particular place. “*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,*” That is, Peter’s confession of faith, not Peter as a person. “*And the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*” The ‘Gates of Hades’ were right next to the imperial temple complex, and what mattered was Peter’s declaration of faith. “*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” How significant that Jesus entrusted the keys of the kingdom to a fisherman – a

skilled sailor! In Greek mythology, a *ferryman* carried the souls of the deceased across the River Styx. But the Gates of Hades would never prevail against the redeeming love of Jesus who would give to his followers living water gushing up from within themselves.

What we celebrate today is the faith of Peter and the faith of Paul, who put into practice the faith that they confessed. Both faced many dangers as they led the infant Church. Both were imprisoned, flogged, and threatened with death. As Paul said to Timothy in the epistle reading today, *"I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."* After his resurrection and his restoration of Peter, Jesus gave a chilling prophecy that Peter would also pay the ultimate price for his admission of love: *"when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go"* (see John 21:18) thus predicting his own crucifixion. In bearing witness to Jesus, they were both martyred in Rome; they truly became the seed of the Church.

And that brings me back to Peter the fisherman who was given the keys of the kingdom, and who was told that the gates of Hades would not prevail against a church built on the rock of his faith. Beneath St Peter's Basilica, there is a great crypt where the popes are buried – the good, and the not so good. But underneath that, is the ancient Necropolis – the city of the dead – excavated in the late 1940s, which was next to the Circus of Nero and where Peter was buried after his own crucifixion. Many people have wondered about the authenticity of the bones discovered there, but perhaps that is not what really matters.¹ Near Peter's tomb, there is a little red wall and it is covered with graffiti: the Greek symbol *Chi-Rho* – the first two letters of the word 'Christ' – then the Greek words, *Petros, Thanatos, and Zoe* - *Peter, Death and Life*.

The first time I visited the necropolis under Saint Peter's, I was anxious to get to Peter's tomb – to be near the remains of the great Saint – near the Rock-man, on whose faith the church was built so that the gates of Hades would never prevail against it. To Peter, to who was given the keys of the kingdom, But when we did eventually get to his tomb, the Roman Catholic guide left me speechless as he explained what many archaeologists think the graffiti means – *'Do not be afraid of death. Peter will lead you to Christ, who is life.'* Our guide turned to us, paused, then said, *"And isn't that more important than if these are the bones of Peter?"*

Peter and Paul pray for us, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

¹. During the excavations during the Second World War under the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, bones were discovered hidden *near* to the tomb of Peter. They were wrapped in cloth with traces of purple and gold threads, which indicate that they were very important to be buried wrapped in such expensive cloth. Archaeologists speculate that they might have been removed from the original tomb to prevent them being stolen. When they were examined, the archaeologists found the bones of a large man, but something very striking about him – there are no bones of the feet or the ankle. Now, there are 26 bones in each foot and ankle, that is a total of 52! Tradition says that Peter was crucified upside down (one of his symbols is an inverted Latin cross). How would a Roman soldier remove a body from a cross quickly that was crucified upside down? I guess by cutting him off from the feet, hence there being so bones of the ankles or the feet. So perhaps these really are the bones of St. Peter!