

## **Janet Berković, sermon on 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 at St Mary's Belgrade**

### **Curiouser and curiouser**

#### **Two saints**

On June 29 the Church celebrates the feast day of Sts. Peter & Paul. The tradition dates back to the third century, possibly earlier. Why? Because these two were connected with Rome, through their preaching, ministry and martyrdom there. Peter was the disciple who Jesus said would become the rock upon which He would build His Church. He was the bold preacher on the day of Pentecost and in the Acts of the Apostles we read how he became the head of the Church in Jerusalem. St. Peter spent his last years in Rome, leading the Church through persecution and eventually being martyred in the year 64. He was crucified upside-down at his own request, because he claimed he was not worthy to die as his Lord. He was buried on Vatican hill, and St. Peter's Basilica is built over his tomb.

St. Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. Once a Jewish fanatic who zealously persecuted Christians, he was converted by an amazing encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus, and spent the remainder of his life preaching the Gospel tirelessly to the Gentiles of the Mediterranean world. Paul was imprisoned and taken to Rome, where he was beheaded in the year 67. He is buried in Rome in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls.

Today, we read about the Council of Jerusalem, when these two met – the only time recorded in the Book of Acts. Actually, elsewhere in the New Testament we discover that these two men were not exactly best friends, and that one occasion at least, were worst enemies. It's a long story, and we will come back to a summary of it later.

#### **A very strange reading**

But before that, let's look at the very curious Old Testament reading with which the Lectionary has blessed us today. Don't you just love such inscrutable texts? Can't you just see John Cleese intoning them in the language of King James? And isn't it great to discover the source of that popular worship song?

Zechariah had a vision of a lampstand. On the top was a bowl of oil, to keep the lights burning. This lampstand was made of gold and had seven lamps, just like the one in the tabernacle, the temple of God. Its source of fuel was clear oil of beaten olives. One of the priestly responsibilities was to make sure that these oil lamps burned continually. That meant tending the lamps: trimming the wicks and filling the oil every morning and evening.

But what was different about the lampstand in the vision was that no one was tending it. In fact, it was being refuelled automatically by two olive trees, each with a branch emptying oil via two golden pipes into the bowl. The work was being accomplished supernaturally. It wasn't happening by might or power. It was happening by the Spirit of God.

There are other details we could pick out of the text, such as the reference to seven (v10) and the two anointed ones (v14), both of which appear again the Book of Revelation, with the seven churches and the two witnesses, who are killed at the pinnacle of their preaching. It does not take a great deal more to at least suggest a connection, as the lectionary seems to, between the old Temple way of doing things, with priests and supplies of oil to keep the flame going, the new way of doing things in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the dynamic duo through whom the Early Church thrived, spread and grew. Peter and Paul, the religious and temporal leaders of the Christian Church on earth. One to lead, and one to teach. Both to die for their unquenchable faith in Jesus Christ.

## **Back to the story of how they fell out.**

According to Paul's report about Peter in his letter to the Galatians, *before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles* (v. 12). In Antioch's fully integrated congregation of Christian Jews and Gentiles, Peter had regularly followed the custom of eating with Gentile Christians. His practice of sharing meals with non-Jewish Christians must have also included sharing the Lord's Supper with them. Undoubtedly, this was taken as an official stamp of approval on the union and equality of Jews and Gentiles in the church. This picture of Peter eating with Gentiles is consistent with the account in Acts of Peter's visit with Cornelius after he was told in a vision that it was alright to eat non-kosher food. To refuse to eat with Gentile Christians would have been to go against the clear revelation he had received from God.

So it is difficult to understand how anybody could have persuaded Peter to stop meals and the Lord's Supper with Gentile believers. But apparently that is exactly what happened. Perhaps the Jerusalem church's mission was made more difficult by accepting Gentiles. Whatever the case, Peter acted against his own better judgment. He separated himself from the Gentiles.

All the Jewish believers in Antioch were subservient to Peter's authority and followed his example. As a result the church was split into racial factions: Jews were divided from Gentiles. It is important to note that Paul accused Peter and the rest of the Jewish believers in Antioch of hypocrisy, not heresy. Their action was inconsistent with their own convictions about the truth of the gospel. They were more influenced by their common racial identity as Jews than by their new experience of unity in Christ with all believers of every race.

It is sometimes frightening to see how otherwise sane and sensible people can be swept away by emotions in the midst of a church crisis. In the heat of the conflict they lose all sense of perspective and proportion.

We should never underestimate the emotional power of national pride and racial ties. We should not be surprised that the Jewish Christians in Antioch put their own Jewish interests above the welfare of the church. Throughout the history of the church, conflicts and divisions have occurred because Christians have been more deeply influenced by their national interests or racial identity than their Christian convictions. Whenever we identify ourselves as American Christians, or British Christians, or Chinese Christians, or African Christians, we must be aware that our nationality may easily become more important to us than being Christians.

Paul had the spiritual discernment to rise above the emotional trauma of the crisis: he *saw* the terrible consequences of Peter's action. Peter had contradicted the gospel. The gospel proclaimed that salvation for both Jews and Gentiles was by way of the cross of Christ and union with Christ. But Peter's backpedalling implied that salvation for Gentiles required strict adherence to the law and incorporation into the Jewish nation. The Gentile believers could not help but conclude from Peter's withdrawal that they were lacking something, that they were unacceptable outcasts. If they wanted to enjoy fellowship with Peter and the mother church in Jerusalem, they would have to become Jews. Their experience of salvation would be incomplete until they became Jews and observed the Jewish law. Gentile believers would have seen these implications of Peter's action even if Peter did not.

The freedom of all Gentile Christians and the whole future of the Gentile mission was at stake. We need to be encouraged by Paul's courageous stand to take our own stand against Christians who repeat the same kind of mistakes in the church today. The church today is indeed divided along

social and religious lines in many parts of the world. It has gone back to the frantic task of filling up the oil, instead of allowing God's Spirit to provide an inexhaustible supply.

**Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says God.**

It is quite possible for churches to continue to function through the efforts of their members, without the Spirit of God. How can we learn to rely not on ourselves, our talents, administrative structures, and what we think of as service? Perhaps we need to pause, stop doing, stop filling up the oil ourselves, and watch and see what happens as God takes over.

Reliance upon God's Spirit is a very different thing. It requires four things of us.

(a) That God is the source and inspiration of all our plans. It is always wrong to make plans and then pray for God's blessing upon them. We must be seeking God's will before ever we hatch up our schemes. Only when we are reasonably sure that what we are planning is what God intends should we go ahead in faith.

(b) That there is consensus in the Church. Vision must be shared and most people must be in favour. In a fallen world we don't need to wait for unanimity (there will always be one or two dissentients to the best of plans); but the people of God should be convinced by the Spirit of God that this is the will of God. Perhaps we need to challenge each other more when we see people making mistakes like Peter's, that go against the Gospel and the new covenant.

(c) That the whole undertaking is steeped in prayer, not just as a convention but because we really believe that this is where success in the struggle lies.

(d) That we do not succumb to discouragement. Zechariah speaks of those who 'despise the day of small things' (4.10). They may be small achievements, small answers to prayer, or small and insignificant people, but to disregard them as beneath God's notice is sheer stupidity. It is a comfort to know that God's temple is made up of very small bricks.

In a sermon in the year 395, St. Augustine of Hippo said of Sts. Peter and Paul: "Both apostles share the same feast day, for these two were one; and even though they suffered on different days, they were as one. Peter went first, and Paul followed. And so we celebrate this day made holy for us by the apostles' blood. Let us embrace what they believed, their life, their labours, their sufferings, their preaching, and their confession of faith."

*Prayer: Save us, Lord, from relying upon any power but yours, and make us open and obedient to your Holy Spirit.*