

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Today we remember the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Augustine of Hippo, the 5th century theologian and philosopher from North Africa, wrote a sermon in about 416 to 420 about these apostles.

Augustine’s sermon.¹

“We ought to celebrate the day of such great martyrs, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, with a much greater congregation. For if we throng to the birthdays of sheep, should we not all the more crowd in for the birthdays of rams? This day has been made holy by the passion of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul. We are, therefore, not talking about some obscure martyrs. *For their voice has gone forth to all the world, and their message to the ends of the earth* [Ps 19,4]. These martyrs realized what they taught: they pursued justice, they confessed the truth, they died for it.

Saint Peter, the first of the apostles and the one who had a fervent love for Christ, merited (i.e. deserved) to hear these words: *‘I say to you that you are Peter’*, for he had said, *‘You are Christ, the Son of the living God.’* Then Christ said, *‘And I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church’* [Matt 16.16, 18]. [It was as if Christ had said to Peter:] “On this rock I will build the faith that you now confess, and on your words, *‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,’* I will build my Church. For you are Peter” – and the name Peter comes from *petra*, the word for “rock,” and not the other way round. “Peter” comes, therefore, from *petra*, just as “Christian” comes from Christ.

As you are aware, Jesus chose his disciples before the passion and called them apostles, and among these almost everywhere, Peter alone deserved to represent the entire Church. And because of that role which he alone had, he merited (deserved) to hear the words: *‘To you I shall give the keys to the kingdom of heaven’* [Matt 16.19]. For it was not one man who received the keys, but the entire Church, considered as one. Now insofar as he represented the unity and universality of the Church, Peter’s preeminence is clear from the words, *‘To you I give,’* for what was given was given to all. For the fact that it was the Church that received the keys to the kingdom of God is clear from what the Lord says elsewhere to all the apostles: *‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’* adding immediately, *‘whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, and whose sins you retain, they are retained’* [John 20.22-23].

Rightly then did the Lord after his resurrection entrust Peter with the leading of the sheep. Yet he was not the only disciple to merit the feeding of the Lord’s sheep; but Christ, in speaking only to one, suggests the unity of all; and so he speaks to Peter, because Peter is first among the apostles. Therefore, do not be disheartened, Peter; reply once, reply twice, reply a third time [John 21.15-17]. The triple confession of your love is to regain what was lost three times by your fear. You must lose three times what you bound three times; untie by love that which your fear unbound. Once, and again, and a third time did the Lord entrust his sheep to Peter.

Both apostles [Peter and Paul] share the same feast day, for these two were 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.

Augustine’s sermon ends here.

¹ “Saint Peter and Saint Paul” p. 593 in ‘All the Saints’, ABC Publishing, Toronto 2007

Some of my own added comments.

Peter and Paul had a very large part to play in the founding of the Church. In the Book of Acts, Luke first focusses his attention on the missionary work of Peter and later describes Paul's work in reaching out to those in the pagan world.

Both Peter and Paul were martyred around the year 64. Paul, as a Roman citizen suffered a quicker end than did Peter. I won't go into the details.

Augustine in his sermon, referred to the three questions that Jesus asked Peter. This is the story for our gospel reading today. Immediately before this story, Jesus was having breakfast on the beach with his disciples after he had helped them to catch a boatload of fish. Now Peter is being commissioned to go out and start God's church.

One of the interesting things about this passage is the Greek translation of 'love.' The subtlety of this interchange between Jesus and Peter is lost in translation. The first time, Jesus says to Peter, “Do you love me (Greek: *agape*) more than these (other disciples)?” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord; you know that I have affection (Greek: *phileo*) for you.” Jesus replies “Feed my lambs.” The second question is the same, Jesus using *agape*, love, and Peter using *phileo*, affection. Jesus replies “Tend my sheep.” With the third question, Jesus uses the word affection, *phileo*, mirroring Peter, and Peter replies, “You know that I have affection *phileo*, for you.” Jesus replies “Feed my sheep.”

What can we make of this? The love that Jesus is first asking of Peter, is the love that will sacrifice anything, including possessions, self interests or even the person's own happiness for the sake of their beloved. Jesus is asking Peter if he is totally committed to him. Peter replies saying that he loves Jesus with a warm brotherly affection for him, wishing Jesus' happiness over his own. It is the sort of love that the Bible exhorts us to love our fellow Christians with, in Romans 12:10. “¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.” While that may be our goal in loving our fellow Christians, Jesus was asking something more of Peter – total love that will sacrifice anything. Maybe Jesus gave up on asking that of Peter, so changed his third question to ‘do you have affection for me?’

Agape love is the sort of love that we should strive for in loving God. 1 John 4:8,16 states that “God is love,” referring to *agape* love. To love God is to love with the same kind of love that he embodies. Jesus' life and death demonstrated the ultimate expression of *agape* love.

Augustine, in his sermon, says about Peter, the “triple confession of your love is to regain what was lost three times by your fear..... untie by love that which your fear unbound.” This refers of course, to Peter's denial of Jesus three times that we read of in John 18:15-27, while Jesus was being questioned by the high priest. Maybe Jesus knew that Peter was not capable at that time of the same total selfless love that Jesus showed him. But later, at his martyrdom, which we remember today, Peter was able to prove that his love for God in Christ was indeed total and self sacrificing.

AMEN