



The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul: The Ordination to the Diaconate of Helen Lingam, Claire Morgan, Paul Richards and Alex Wilson

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John 21:15-19

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But 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." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Though not mentioned in our worship leaflet, the readings we're using for our ordination liturgy this evening are those appointed for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

There are a number of icon representations of Saints Peter and Paul together. In some icons, the two are simply depicted standing side by side, occupying the same flat gold icon looking like two unrelated saints forced to stand in proximity to one another. In other icons Peter and Paul, as the pillars of the early Church, are depicted doing a symbolic task together—holding a small replica of a church building. And finally, in still other icons, the

swarthy Paul and the fisherman turned elder statesman Peter, press towards each other cheek-to-cheek, with their arms encircling each other in a warm embrace.

Of the three motifs, I far prefer the last, not because of the warmth depicted between the two but because that depiction allows me more easily to imagine Peter and Paul as they probably were in their real lives—with their hands moving dangerously close to a choke hold around each others' necks!

For you see, Peter, the hot-headed fisherman follower of Jesus, and Paul, the relentless persecutor of Christians turned relentless evangelist, were opponents around the important and fundamental issue of just how far and in what form the Christian Way should be fully open to Gentiles. Peter, the more conservative of the two, believed that Gentiles would need to observe Jewish practices as a condition of becoming Christian. Paul, on the other hand, did not agree with this, believing that the Gospel of Christ had come to Jews and Gentiles alike, making them equal and, therefore, at unity with one another in the sight of God.

And so the icon with Peter and Paul embracing is not a depiction at how things *actually were* between the two. Instead it's a look at how we *think of them now*—shown together because even in their differences, they were *both* called by God to build up the Jesus movement that became the Church, shown embracing because *God* embraced both of them first.

This, then, gets at what most intrigues me about the Feast Day of Saints Peter and Paul especially as we ordain four deacons today. We and they live in a spiritual tradition in which the two pillars of that tradition are not only *not* upright role models, they didn't even get along. We and they are living in a church that from its foundation has been in a lively and messy struggle as it attempts to be faithful to the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

And so today let us struggle. Let us all struggle—and this is meant not only for our four diaconal ordinands but for all of us—let us struggle, just as Peter and Paul did, with who we are as a church. Let us struggle with just how far to extend this church of ours as we engage the culture of our neighborhoods, the culture of our country and the culture of our times. Let us struggle as we engage these things in our attempt to bring the humble life, the costly death and the freeing resurrection of Jesus Christ to the world.

Let us struggle—and this is meant not only for our four diaconal ordinands but for all of us—let us struggle, just as Peter and Paul did, with who we are as people. Let us struggle with our own tendency to believe that religion is about rules and, therefore, that spiritual practice is all about the striving after perfection. Let us struggle to accept a God who has entered the messiness of the life of the flesh and has built his temple there. Let us struggle to accept the indissoluble bond that God has created between us and herself at baptism. Let us struggle to accept our complicated and always-under-construction selves as the very selves that God will use to draw us and the world to God's very self.

And finally let us struggle—and this is meant not only for our four diaconal ordinands but for all of us—let us struggle, just as Peter and Paul did, with our vocations. Let us struggle with what it means to respond to Jesus' words "follow me"—to give up our lives in order to find them and to find that to do so means giving up the expectation that we will be traveling

down a straight path, giving up the expectation that the one we follow will respect and leave our plans untouched and uninterrupted.

These very struggles are, of course, expressed in our reading from John for today in which we hear Peter and Jesus in conversation on the beach after the resurrected Jesus cooks a breakfast of newly caught fish for the disciples.

During that conversation, Jesus asks the imperfect Peter the same question three times, echoing and, some say, redeeming Peter's three denials of Jesus after his arrest. "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" Jesus repeats. And three painful times the imperfect Peter replies: "Yes I do. I do. I do." Three times Jesus asks, and three times Peter replies. And each time Jesus tells him to do something out of that love—feed my sheep, feed my lambs feed my sheep—whoever they might be and wherever they might be. Jesus then tells Peter that in doing these things, he will no longer get to go where he would choose to go but will be taken down paths he would not choose for himself. Jesus then ends all of this with the words that he said to Peter the first time they ever met: "Follow me."

My dear diaconal ordinands, Helen, Claire, Paul and Alex, in a moment you will be ordained deacons in the Church of God, a church that today we remember is standing on the life and witness of Saints Peter and Paul together. As deacons you will be asked to be and to do a vital and essential thing for us all—to be both a sign and an animator of the Christ-like service of the whole people of God in the world.

As you are ordained through the Holy Spirit and as you are vested in the beautiful garb of your new role, never forget the legacy of the two we remember today. For they invite you into the ongoing and lively question of how far we are to extend a Church that is called to be the love of God for the sake of the world. They give you the precious gift of seeing your own and others' shortcomings as the raw material for God's work of redemption. And they offer you the gift of surprise—the reality that the path of your vocation will not be of your making alone but will be cunningly shaped by the Holy One who, frankly, has only a passing regard for your plans.

As we as a community today, know that we are paying for you. I am praying that you will be given the gifts of holy awe, bold humility, a heart for compassion and justice, and boundless joy.

