

This Sunday's readings – Peter and Paul – Today we celebrate the feasts of Peter, the first leader of the Church, and Paul, the first theologian of the Church. But why both of them on this day? Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains – “There are very few critical historians today who would deny that both Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome. However, June 29 is not the date of their martyrdom. In fact, it is unlikely that they were martyred on the same day. Some New Testament scholars would place the death of Paul at the conclusion of the two-year imprisonment with which Acts closes (about 62), and Peter's death during the Neronian persecution in 64, a view that this commentator favors. Why, then, June 29? To quote P. Battifol, “The festival of the two apostles will be celebrated on the same day, June 29, not because this date is the anniversary of their martyrdom, but because it is the anniversary of the institution of a joint observance in their honor.” Oscar Cullmann, the Swiss Protestant scholar, agrees, adding that the choice of June 29 was due to the earlier association of this day with the founder of the city of Rome, Romulus. This Christian observance in Rome began in 258. Historically, it is difficult to connect the foundation of the church in Rome with Peter or Paul. There must have been Jewish Christians in that city before Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome in 48 (see Aquila and Priscilla, Acts 18:2). By the time Paul wrote Romans (ca. 56), there were both Gentile and Jewish groups in Rome (the strong and the weak of Romans 15). Apparently the former had arrived between the expulsion of the Jews in 48 and the death of Claudius in 54, while the Jewish Christians would have drifted back after Nero's succession. This is what created the tensions that are discussed in Romans 15. Galatians 2:7 states that Peter and Paul were recognized as the heads of the Jewish and Gentile missions respectively. In view of this, it may be claimed that Peter and Paul were indirectly responsible for the foundation of the Roman church”.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we read the dramatic and miraculous story of Peter's rescue from the Herod's prison. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment about Herod – “Herod Agrippa reigned over the tetrarchy of Philip (see Luke 3:1) from 37 C.E. and over Galilee from 39 C.E. He died in 44 C.E. For reasons that are not clear, Agrippa reversed the hitherto prevailing policy of the Jewish authorities toward the Aramaic-speaking Christians and persecuted them. Presumably by now this was a move that was likely to make him popular”. Herod, true to form, would do anything to be in good stead with the Jewish hierarchy, more specifically Pharisaic Judaism. Persecuting the early Christians allowed him to do just that. After killing James, the brother of John, he had Peter arrested. His intent was to kill him also. Unfortunately for Herod, he had Peter arrested on the eve of Passover, which meant that Peter could not be tried or executed for the 10 days of Passover. The Christian community prayed for Peter and their prayers were answered. An angel of the Lord rescued Peter from Herod's prison even though Herod's guards surrounded Peter. Nothing is impossible for the Lord! We must never underestimate the power of prayer.

In the Gospel story from Matthew, we see Peter's profession of faith and Jesus' proclamation to Peter that “upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it”. The word “rock” is from the Aramaic word

kepa which is translated into the Greek as Kephas by which Peter is called in the Petrine Letters. The word “netherworld” is a reference to the Greek Hades, the land of the dead. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on today’s Gospel reading – “This passage has been variously interpreted in the Church, so far as the continuance of the Petrine office is concerned. The usual Protestant interpretation, which also has some patristic support, is that the “rock” refers to Peter’s faith, and that therefore this text lives on effectively in the Church’s continuing to confess Jesus as Messiah. Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans have generally seen the continuity of the Petrine office in the collective episcopate. Of course, the traditional Roman Catholic position has always been, at least until Vatican II, that this text was intended from the start to be the Lord’s institution of Peter in that office which is still perpetuated in the papacy. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholic scholars have put forward a more nuanced view that would see in this text the beginnings of a trajectory that was destined to lead eventually to the papacy, while Anglican and Lutheran scholars have been prepared to recognize under certain circumstances a role for the papacy in a reunited Church which would represent an acceptable implementation of this text”.

Paul’s story is much different. Paul, in his early days, persecuted the early Church until the Lord made Himself known to Paul. Paul then became one of the greatest champions of the Church and it’s first theologian. Both Peter and Paul gave their all for the Church. How did they die? Christian tradition states that both were martyred for their faith. In fact, Peter, when he learned he was to be crucified, requested that he be crucified upside down because he believed that he was not worthy enough to be crucified right side up as Jesus was. In reality, however, there are no written records to prove this one way or another. Does it really matter?

As I have mentioned before, one cannot truly understand the scripture readings unless one understands the culture of the Eastern Mediterranean people in the region of Palestine. John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* helps us understand today’s Gospel reading – “Today’s familiar story takes on a very different orientation when placed respectfully in its Mediterranean cultural context.

DYADIC PERSONALITY

Americans are recognized as the most individualistic people who ever lived on the face of this planet. Each one strives to be distinct. In the United States, everyone has a personal social security number and many other distinctive and singular identities. Mediterranean people are exactly the opposite. Experts describe them as dyadic personalities. The word dyad means “pair.” Such people are other oriented to such an extent that they have no sense of their individuality but depend rather on the opinions of others to help them know who they are. Jesus’ question, therefore, is not a “theology quiz” for his disciples. It reflects a normal, Mediterranean curiosity by Jesus, a dyadic personality, about what other people think. Like everyone else in this culture, Jesus needs such feedback because he does not know who he is, and he is trying to learn this from significant others in his life.

STEREOTYPING

In Jesus' case, the question is particularly interesting because the normal stereotyping of that culture was not working. Jesus' enemies feel satisfied in knowing him as "Jesus of Nazareth." To know a person's home village is to know everything about that person. All people in Nazareth were presumed to be alike. Nathanael's rhetorical question, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) simply echoes the commonly held, stereotypical image of that village's inhabitants: worthless or no good. Another stereotypical identification of Jesus is "the stone worker's or wood worker's son" (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3). The ancient wisdom observed, "like father, like son. To know a family was to know everything about every member of that family. "Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?' And they took offense at Jesus" (Matt 13:55-57). True to Mediterranean form, Jesus' disciples tell him what others are saying about him, and how others are perceiving him: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, another of the prophets. All of these are honorable if mistaken perceptions. But Jesus presses for Simon's opinion, and he says, "the Messiah, the son of the living God."

JESUS' IDENTITY

Jesus now has a rather large assortment of opinions to ponder. In gratitude to Simon for this information, Jesus bestows on him a nickname, Rocky or Peter. New names were regularly given at significant moments in a group's life, especially to the more prominent members. In addition, Jesus promises that Peter will become like him, a broker who can provide access to God the patron. This is the significance of giving him the "keys of the kingdom." Keys open doors, which is another way to describe a broker's specialty. Over and beyond that, Peter is given a distinctive power to declare authoritative judgments ("binding and loosing"), something which appears to have been given to all the disciples in Matthew 18:18. If American believers read Jesus' question here from the intense psychological perspective that dominates modern American convictions about self-knowledge and knowledge of others, they will assume Jesus knows who he is and is testing his friends to see if they know. If they use the Mediterranean scenario painted above, they will have to assume Jesus does not know and looks to significant others in order to find out. How will you read the passage?"

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team