

Feast of Sts Peter & Paul (2013)
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

The heroes of the Bible, Old Testament and New, are real people. Which is to say they are all flawed. Many have significant virtues; are close to God and speak his word with great courage and at considerable cost, but they are never super-heroes nor plaster saints.

Elisha was a great prophet and consummate politician. But in one of the Bible's most curious episodes, he takes offence at a crowd of boys who call him "Baldy" and he sends a bear to kill forty-two of them.

David was the great king. He united the tribes and extended the borders of Israel to their widest. It is a son of David who was eagerly awaited by many as the Messiah who would inaugurate the new age of God. But the Bible does not shirk from describing his adultery, the murder he committed to cover his adultery; his passivity in the face of his daughter's rape; nor his blind love towards his son Absalom who rebels against his father and would kill him. As an enfeebled old man he is manipulated by Bathsheba and Nathan to ensure Solomon succeeds him; and David's final speech could have been spoken by Don Corleone, as Solomon is instructed about who to get rid of.

(You can hear more about these characters and their colourful stories in the talks on the Old Testament which continue with a three Saturday run beginning next weekend. Details are in the newsletter and the talks will appear in due time on the parish's website)

The heroes we celebrate today, Peter, our leader in the faith, and Paul, the great proclaimer of the faith, they too are flawed individuals. Peter is like the ever eager but none too bright schoolboy who always has his hand in the air and says the first thing that comes into his head. And it is usually wrong. He grows up to be a bit of a wind-bag, still talking before his brain is in gear. But he is likeable. He can weep for his mistakes, and learn from his cowardice.

Paul, on the other hand, was the class swot. A quick brain and an analytic skill that was matched with refined oratorical skills. Paul was always right. And he let everyone know that he was always right. Insufferable prig. He would grow into a zealot, who would throw himself into any venture that gripped him. But he remained always right. So he was able to tell Peter to his face that he was wrong in the way he accepted and then rejected gentiles as table companions. He could mock the "so called pillars of the Church" who happened to be the leading apostles. He was fiercely loyal to his friends, though they must have found him a difficult, tireless, 'for goodness sake slow down a bit' companion.

Peter and Paul: contrasting personalities, they do not appear to have got on together. But they were united in love of the Lord, in proclamation of the Gospel, and in

martyrdom. Tradition, of course puts that in Rome in the persecutions of the Emperor Nero.

Peter crucified in Nero's circus on the Vatican Hill and buried in a graveyard close by; his grave became the focal point for a church built by the Emperor Constantine on a bogey hillside. It had to be there because the grave had to be below the high altar. The Church has been rebuilt but its orientation has remained the same, with the High Altar, and now Bernini's swirling *baldichino*. over the same spot, where we now know there is an ancient graveyard and a wall with graffito reading "Here is Peter".

Paul executed by beheading at *Tre Fontane* and now buried just off the *Via Ostia Antica*, outside the city walls, where the Basilica of St Paul's stands. Below have recently been found remains which may mark the grave of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Neither Peter nor Paul were super heroes. They were flawed human beings, just as we are, who gave everything for Christ, as we are called to do.

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Feast of Sts Peter & Paul – Sung Vespers (2013)

One of my earliest memories is seeing, on our recently purchased (black and white)

TV, a picture of a man being wafted with great fronds. I asked my mum what they were and what was going on. "That's the Pope", she said, "And they are ostrich feathers." I looked puzzled. "He is very important and that is a sign of how important he is." Satisfied (it would be some years before I learnt to be a critical thinker) I went back to play with my toys. It was probably the opening of the second Vatican Council that I had been watching.

In my life time the whole manner of the exercise of the Petrine Office has been transformed. The ostrich feathers quickly disappeared. The great Triple Tiara was given by Pope Paul VI to benefit the poor of India. Then the *Sedia Gestatoria*, the sedan chair without the covers, carried by gentlemen in dinner jackets and bow ties was dispensed with.

There was a regression under the papacy of Benedict when an older more baroque style of vestments with yards of lace below became the usual papal attire. This was apiece with his restoring of the Tridentine Rite of celebrating the Eucharist. But that sartorial change may turn out to be a blip. (I was in Rome two weeks ago and it is astonishing to see how few pictures there are of Benedict on display. John Paul II is prominent still; and Francis is everywhere. Benedict seems to have been quickly forgotten. While his papacy will be seen as an epilogue to that of his beatified predecessor, I think his writings will be long remembered and quoted.)

Now Francis has chosen to forsake the papal apartments and live in an ecclesiastical Travel Lodge. He calls himself "Bishop" and seems keen to share the burdens of office in a way that gives suggests collegiality could become a part of Church governance. He paid his hotel bill personally; he rings people himself; he telephoned his newspaper seller in Buenos Aires to cancel his order. And he became the first successor of St Peter to take the name Francis, *il poverello*, the little poor man of Assisi who rejected his father's wealth to beg; and who metaphorically and then in actuality rebuilt Christ's Church.

Now it can be said that these are only gestures, matters of style. Surely there needs to be substance, clear changes. But that is to misread Rome. There style is substance as a number of Vatican watchers have pointed out. A lot of messages are conveyed by the way things are done, and there is expectation that the style is authoritative. It is expected that it will be imitated.

The symbols of the pre Conciliar Church, the ostrich feathers and triple tiara were imitation of the courts and style of emperors who commanded armies are ruled vast territories, as did Popes in earlier times. It was intended to instil awe; to convey a sense of power and might; to show that the Pope was greater than any earthly power.

In the modern world such shows of pomp and power are for purposes of pageant only. Earthly power has been revealed time and again as corrupt, self-serving, exploitative and, oppressive of the poor to the gain of the rich.

Francis' style points towards significant changes: He has referred to himself consistently as Bishop of Rome, indicating that he sees himself as a bishop among brother bishops. So he does not pronounce at them from a throne but sits among them, "as if around a camp-fire" as one described their audience. He has appointed eight cardinals from around the world to work with him in the governance of the Church and, one hopes, the reform of the Curia. The Collegiality which the Bishops of the Council were seeking is perhaps coming to effective fruition.

His call for the Church to be a poor Church for the poor has reverberated around the world. If it reverberates around the Curia and is taken to heart then substance will indeed be subject to style.

With regard to style in terms of warmth, affability and the common touch, Francis was quickly being compared to Blessed John XXIII. And this warmth has extended to ecumenical relations, with friendly, positive meetings with, among others, Justin Welby. Benedict was concerned with unity within the Church and strove, perhaps misguidedly, to re-integrate those whose rejection of the Council and with it Papal authority, made the enterprise futile. Benedict's out-reach was directed most of all to the Orthodox. Francis appears keen to embrace all other Christians. One is reminded of John who would greet "separated brethren" with the words, "I am Joseph, your brother", bringing to mind the great reconciliation of the sons of Jacob/Israel in the Book of Genesis.

So, with a new Papal style, in the likeness of the little poor man of Assisi, with a Jesuit's emphasis on getting down to the important things without unnecessary peripherals, with a willingness to throw off the straight-jacket of curial correctness, and a freedom to speak from the heart not from carefully formulated texts, we are already seeing a renewal of the Church in the hearts and minds of the faithful in the Church, the disappointed and disillusioned, and other Christians, and those of no belief, who see in Francis a good man, who lives his faith.

Francis' preferred self-description is "Bishop of Rome". There are two other titles which express what we see in him in this role: One is "*servus servorum Dei*" - servant of the servants of God". He has made it clear that he intends to serve the poor; and that they have a priority in the work of the Church. And the title that was inherited from the High priest of ancient Rome: *Pontifex Maximus* – literally the greatest bridge builder.

If Francis fulfils the roles expressed in these titles, as he has already begun to do, then he may become a point of unity for all Christians, and for people of good will everywhere.