

Today we commemorate the life and ministry of Saint Peter. It has long been the practice of the church to remember and celebrate those individuals who were graced by God to have a significant impact on the Church and who provide admirable examples for us to follow. This is the emphasis of the Anglican Church's feast days. Other traditional branches of the Church, particularly those in the Roman and Eastern Orthodox tradition, will pray to the saints, asking them to intercede to the Father for us in much the same way that we ask each other to pray for us as needed. The scripture does not explicitly prohibit this practice, though I would remind us today, that the scripture also does not provide us any guarantee that the saints can hear our prayers to them.

Where does this leave us as Anglicans following the *Via Media*, the middle way? We do not condemn those who wish to incorporate such practice in their private devotions, but likewise we, here at our church, do not incorporate prayers to the saints into our corporate worship. When we commemorate saints, we pray to God in thanksgiving for their lives and the example that they set for us, asking that He would grant us the courage to live boldly for him just as they did. Learning about the saints of old, both those in biblical history and those of whom we have historical records, puts before us the possibility of holiness. These were real people just like you and me. They were flawed, some deeply, just like you and me. Yet, these ordinary people showed extraordinary faith in their lives. They endeavored much for the kingdom of God; they endured much for the kingdom of God. We are called to do the same.

The celebration of saints days, therefore, reminds us that we are neither the beginning of the story of the Church or the end of it. Many have gone before us, and their stories are our heritage, as well as our inspiration to aspire to great faith and to prepare for the day of trouble. Should we Christians truly be persecuted in this country, will we collapse under the pressure, will we throw a pinch of incense on the altar to Caesar, will we abandon our brothers and sisters in the faith to save our own skins? Many throughout history have done this very thing. Or we will sacrifice ourselves in order that others may live and be inspired by our stories. When we remember saints days, this is always the implicit question in the background. So many of our brothers and sisters in the past greatly suffered out of love for Jesus Christ. Hearing their stories prepares us to do the same. I do not wish to be martyred. But God grant me the faith that I should not shrink from such a fate, that I would not cower in fear, if my Lord Jesus Christ calls me to follow so closely in His footsteps. May we all make this our prayer.

Of course, St. Peter was no stranger to adversity. He suffered somewhat alongside Christ; he flailed and failed during the earthly ministry of our Master. Yet from the day of Pentecost forward, we see this apostle acting boldly with conviction. He did not cower from the worldly authorities, but confronted them. Our reading from Acts this morning relates to

us that Peter was thrown into prison, potentially awaiting execution at the hands of Herod Antipas, the Tetrach of Galilee. Yet God still had work for Peter to do. We read how an angel appeared to Peter, as if in a dream, and that this angel freed Peter from the chains that bound him and led him out of the Prison to freedom. God had work for Peter and so God released him from those who opposed God's kingdom.

Let us note in this passage, who has the agency here. Peter is charged by God to preach Christ. He is not responsible to stay out of prison or to keep clear of the officials or to please the Jews. He is responsible to preach the kingdom of Christ and to disciple those brought into the kingdom. What happens to Saint Peter when he obeys Christ? He suffers. Our obedience to Christ will lead us to suffering as well. It isn't our responsibility to avoid suffering. It isn't our responsibility to look for persecution – which was, in fact, a problem in the early church. Some were looking to be martyred, because they believed that following Christ into his death was a privilege. And indeed it is, but a living saint can do more for the kingdom than a dead saint. We are not to go around poking the bear. Like Saint Peter, we are simply to keep our eyes on Christ, being sensitive to His leading in order to share our faith. Should we be despised for our testimony, then so be it – let us praise God.

Remember that the real goal of our witness is to grow the kingdom. It isn't to win arguments. It isn't to prove how holy we are to the world. It is to love God through obedience and to let Him draw all mankind to Christ. We cast our eyes toward heaven so that we would love God with all of our hearts, and souls, and minds. We cast our eyes toward our fellow human beings so that we would love them as Christ does. This is the task with which Saint Peter was charged. This is the task with which we are charged.

One last thing that we must point out in the reading from Acts this morning. Verse 5 reads, "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." Our first duty as Christians desiring to grow the Kingdom of God is to pray. St. Paul in First Thessalonians commands us to pray without ceasing. Yet I suspect that the average American believer spends very little time in prayer. Understand also, the verse doesn't say that the individual believers were diligent in their prayers. It says "... prayer was made without ceasing by the church." If we want to grow the kingdom, then we must be a praying parish. This doesn't mean just on an individual level, but as a parish.

We have structures in place to accomplish this. I again commend to you, particularly to those who are able to fit this in their schedules, to join us for the daily offices. Prayer, and I would even emphasize, corporate prayer, is the foundation upon which the kingdom of God is built. Prayer opens our eyes to the needs of the world, it binds us closely to God and through God to each other, and it reveals to us areas in which we need to repent. If St. Peter, who Christ named the rock of The Church, needed the prayers of the Church in order to

fulfill his calling, then we should humble ourselves to live into this fundamental truth. We, as the Church, must be praying.

Practically what does this mean? It means that you would join us on Wednesday night for Evening Prayer. This is the starting point. I expect to develop this time more fully when I am able to attend after my resignation from my secular job, but for now, begin to prioritize this in your life; develop the discipline. God expects the prayers of the Church. It may not be what you want to do, but let us, for lack of a better term, get over ourselves. The prayers of the church made a difference in the ministry of St. Peter. Your prayers make a difference in the ministry of this parish.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN