

Service of the Word 28 June 2020

St Paul (Pentecost 4)

Welcome

Good Morning and welcome to our service. Today we celebrate the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, but we are going to park Peter to one side and focus on Paul. He is, of course, our Patron Saint here in Strathnairn with our lovely church named to honour him. Paul's main feast, celebrating, his conversion on the road to Damascus, is actually celebrated in mid-February. As you know this is a tricky time weather wise here in the Scottish Highlands. We decided some years ago to adopt this June feast day that Paul shares with that other great early church leader St Peter; to adopt this date in June to celebrate our patron Saint Paul. These celebrations as well as a special Eucharist would have included a slap-up meal afterwards. This year we are missing gathering physically for both worship and feasting but we can still celebrate our great patron saint Paul, giving thanks for his courage and fearsome determination to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

Gathering

We are gathered together as the family of God
to offer praise and thanksgiving
to ask forgiveness of our sins
to hear and receive God's holy Word
to pray for the needs of the world
and to seek God's grace
that through Jesus Christ our Lord
and in the power of the Holy Spirit
we may give ourselves to God's service.

Penitence

You raise the dead to life in the Spirit.
Lord, have mercy.

You bring pardon and peace to the broken in heart.
Christ, have mercy.

You make one by your Spirit the torn and divided.

Lord, have mercy.

O Lord, all we long for is before you;
and our deep sighing is not hidden from you.
But we acknowledge our wickedness;
we are filled with sorrow at our sin.
Be pleased O Lord, to deliver us;
O Lord, make haste to help us.
May the Lord forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are
and direct what we shall be,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Praise

Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to God's people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
with God the Son, Jesus Christ,
and God the Holy Spirit,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, by the preaching of your servant Paul you caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world. May we who celebrate his ministry follow him in bearing witness to your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, now and for ever. Amen.

First Reading

Acts 26:10-18 New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

10 And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. **11** Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

12 'On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. **13** About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. **14** We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,[a] "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

15 'Then I asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," the Lord replied. **16** "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. **17** I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them **18** to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Second Reading

Philippians 1:1-11 The Message (MSG)

1 1-2 Paul and Timothy, both of us committed servants of Christ Jesus, write this letter to all the followers of Jesus in Philippi, pastors and ministers included. We greet you with the grace and peace that comes from God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ.

3-6 Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.

7-8 It's not at all fanciful for me to think this way about you. My prayers and hopes have deep roots in reality. You have, after all, stuck with me all the way

from the time I was thrown in jail, put on trial, and came out of it in one piece. All along you have experienced with me the most generous help from God. He knows how much I love and miss you these days. Sometimes I think I feel as strongly about you as Christ does!

9-11 So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

12-14 I want to report to you, friends, that my imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of being squashed, the Message has actually prospered. All the soldiers here, and everyone else, too, found out that I'm in jail because of this Messiah. That piqued their curiosity, and now they've learned all about him. Not only that, but most of the followers of Jesus here have become far more sure of themselves in the faith than ever, speaking out fearlessly about God, about the Messiah.

Reflection

After that dramatic conversion experience we hear about in the Acts of the Apostles Paul sets off on his missionary travels with a quite extraordinary tenacity and zeal for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Traveling with his companions in what is now modern Turkey he is called in a vision to cross the sea to Europe, landing in what is now northern Greece, known then as Macedonia. He eventually arrives in the Roman city of Philippi, which even today as you walk around the ruins it is still easy to see that this was a once great city with all the mod cons the retired Roman military officers and their families would have expected. Paul's usual approach in any new city was to seek out the Jewish population, in the first instance. Philippi did not have synagogue so on the Sabbath the Jewish community met outside the city wall near the river. The people he met here came from all over the world, some Jewish by birth but many Greek or Roman Gentile *worshippers of God* and thus part of the local Jewish community. This

community at Philippi came to have a very special place in Paul's heart as our second reading shows. He visited them we think two or three times and wrote to them often but only one letter to his Christian family in Philippi survives.

This letter written from one of his many imprisonments, probably in this case from Ephesus, is a powerful testimony to the resilience of the gospel. The fledgling Christian community in Philippi did not have a building, a church. They continued to meet in the open by the river where the first baptisms took place. Much like our own Parson Duncan meeting with Christians from across the Highlands in the shadow of Brin rock. It is a testimony to the strength of Christian faith established by Paul in Philippi that in time there were no fewer than four Christian basilicas, among the ruins at Philippi. The most impressive is the octagonal church with beautiful mosaics some of which depict Paul's first visit to the city. The example of the church in Philippi is a good lesson for us. It went from humble beginnings at the riverside, through the greatness of lofty basilicas, to the ruins you see today. But Paul's message remains clear they cannot imprison the Message - they cannot imprison the gospel that Paul preached- they cannot imprison the gospel of Jesus crucified and risen.

***** part 2

We can take heart from this message that you cannot imprison the gospel. We can hold onto the faith that although our church building remains closed just now the words that Paul wrote to his faithful congregation in Philippi are just as true now as they were then; you cannot imprison the gospel. Over these past months of lockdown and in the coming months of uncertainty about emerging into the world again this is the message we need to hold fast - cannot imprison the gospel. Paul knew how important connection and community were for not just preaching but actually living the gospel. The Christians at Philippi in his own words ***stuck with me all the***

way from the time I was thrown in jail, put on trial, and came out of it in one piece. All along you have experienced with me the most generous help from God.

Paul never quite knew what to expect at each stage of his journey. He never quite knew what he would find in each town or city he preached. And he never quite knew whether the fledgling Christian community he founded would prosper after he left. The Christians at Philippi did grow and prosper for as long as the city remained inhabited and their legacy is still present throughout the region in churches, monasteries and faithful worshipping communities.

It seems to me that we are at a kind of fledgling state ourselves as the world begins to emerge from this pandemic. We know however much we talk in terms of ***getting back to normal***. That really isn't possible. Because we cannot see, because we have no clear vision for a ***new normal*** our lives feel uncertain, fractured and difficult to navigate. It is going to be like that for quite a while I imagine. There has been a major shift in our world view and there is no going back, even if we want to. We can only go forward; but we go forward hopefully with a little of Paul's tenacity and zeal holding fast to his message to the Christians at Philippi that you cannot imprison the gospel. Whatever our future holds I echo Paul's prayer for each and everyone of us:

that our love will flourish and that we will not only love much but well. We will learn to love appropriately. To use our head and test our feelings so that our love is sincere and intelligent that we may become far more sure of ourselves in the faith than ever, speaking out fearlessly about God, about the Messiah. Amen

Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Let us pray, for the church and the world, thanking God for the blessings in our lives

Intercessions

Blessing

Our Father,
who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen

Act of Dedication

Almighty God,
we thank you for the gift of your holy word:
may it be a lantern to our feet,
a light upon our paths,

and a strength to our lives.
Take us and use us to love and serve all people
in the power of the Holy Spirit
and in the name of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Praise

You send forth your Spirit, O Lord; *
you renew the face of the earth.
You send forth your Spirit, O Lord; *
you renew the face of the earth.
May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in all his
works.
You renew the face of the earth.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
You send forth your Spirit, O Lord; * you renew the face of the earth.

Blessing

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and
minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our
Lord: And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy
Spirit, Be with you and all those for whom you have a care this day and
evermore. Amen