

## CALLED TO SERVE

Acts 12:1-11; 2 Tim 4.6–8, 17–18; Matt 16.13–19

### Introduction

When Jesus ascended to heaven the angels are supposed to have asked him who would continue his ministry on earth. 'I have chosen a bunch of fishermen, a tax collector, a nationalist agitator and a load of supporting women' Jesus answered.

The angels gasped at this odd collection of people and exclaimed: 'It'll never work!' To which Jesus replied 'I have no other plan!' I wonder what the angels would say if Jesus gave them a list of members of St James and said 'I have no other plan?' Perhaps they would say, with the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight – 'Good plan, Lord!'

It was St Theresa of Avila who wrote: *Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth, yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.* But I wonder whether you see yourselves like that?

Today we celebrate the two pillars of the early Church: Peter and Paul, and we might think of them as saints who could do no wrong and who were perfect in their calling to serve the Lord in founding the Church.

### Peter – failure but a good heart

But let's take a closer look at these two characters on whom so much depended.

Jesus' nickname for Simon was The Rock (which is what Peter means). But it's hard to imagine a less rock-like personality. He was unreliable, doing and saying the wrong thing, unable to keep his rash promises. On the mountain of the transfiguration when he should have been talking about spiritual things, he babbled about building shelters. When he saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter thought he could do the same. He succeeded for a few steps, and then his faith began to fail and he started to sink. Jesus reached out and saved him.

He recognised Jesus as the Messiah, but then tried to stop him going to Jerusalem to be crucified, so that Jesus called him 'You Satan' meaning 'You tempter!' He promised to follow Jesus even to death, and when the soldiers appeared in the Garden of Gethsemane, he hit out with his swords at one of them, and then ran away as quickly

as his feet would carry him. Later, in spite of going to see what was happening to Jesus at his trial, Peter denied he ever knew him.

If Jesus was looking for a rock to build his Church upon, he could hardly have found a less likely candidate than unpredictable Peter. Yet Peter's heart was in the right place even though he messed up trying to follow Jesus faithfully. Peter genuinely loved Jesus and trusted his friend who'd called him to follow. After his resurrection Jesus sorted things out with Peter and they were reconciled. Peter found renewed courage and strength to carry on.

After Jesus had ascended to heaven and after the coming of the Holy Spirit we find Peter in prison because of his faith. It must have been terrible, seeing James dragged away to be beheaded. But God had other plans for Peter and rescued him from jail in a miraculous way. It's a tricky question why God allowed James to lose his life at that stage whilst Peter got led out by a jail-breaking angel. The way the Christians looked at it in those days was that it was an honour to be counted by God as deserving of martyrdom.

For now we'll have to leave it at that because we are concentrating more on what the living can do for God.

#### [Saul – another name changer](#)

As the Christian community began to grow it soon moved out from its roots as a sect within the Jewish people. It expanded into the Greek-speaking world of the Roman Empire.

Who did Jesus choose to be the leader of this new expanding Church? Why, Saul of Tarsus, another unlikely candidate. Saul, like Peter, changed his name. After his conversion he was known as Paul. Before, though, he had been a narrow-minded religious expert: a staunch Pharisee who was disturbed by this new sect of people who followed Jesus in what was called the Way. He set about hunting them down and trying to put a stop to it. He was the scourge of the first Christians and had stood approvingly, acting as cloakroom attendant, when Stephen the first Christian martyr was stoned.

Saul was bad tempered, quick to judge and hasty in his choice of words. Would you choose such a man to lead a group of congregations scattered across hundreds of miles apart across the Empire? They tended to be a quarrelsome lot, who'd only a hazy idea of what it meant to be Christian.

You and I might not choose such a person, but Jesus did. Jesus knew that, like Peter, and like anyone else who was truly touched by him, he could transform the most unlikely candidate. Jesus saw beneath the unattractive exterior, he saw a man with

vision, a man with the drive to take the gospel far over land and sea, a man whose mind-skills could lay many foundations of the NT faith which has survived 2000 years.

Paul didn't invent a new religion, as some people allege, but he took Hebrew ways of thinking which Jesus had instilled into his first disciples and translated them into ideas that would attract people brought up in an entirely different culture. Jesus chose Paul to do that for him.

### Learning from failure

A man applied for a job recently, and was turned down. He demanded to know why, since he was clearly the most qualified candidate. He was told it was because he had been too successful in his life so far.

A leader needs to be someone who's known what it is to fail, and been able to learn from their failures. That's why Jesus chose Peter and Paul. They'd both failed spectacularly in their early days, and been broken by shame and disappointment until they were on their knees. Then they did the only thing which you can succeed at when you're on your knees: they prayed. They'd learnt from their failures to sympathise with the failures of those they were leading; and we're all failures in some way, if only we'd admit it.

I originally came to this parish 13 years ago, having only survived in my previous parish for 2 years. Whilst it wasn't my fault why we decided to leave the last place, I had failed to handle an extremely difficult situation in the right way. We realised if we didn't get out, it would break us. It was a great relief to come to a team of ministers who were supportive – indeed, after a few months here, my confidence in leadership was renewed when my colleagues voted me in as the next Team Leader.

Many of you will also know that Jeanette and I were both widowed at an early age. It's a blow you don't recover from very easily, but we know what it is to be vulnerable and begin to find your experience can help others.

As many of you know we are very happy to be involved with St James and as I look back over the years since I was ordained in 1985. I thank God for the opportunity for a fruitful and fulfilling ministry here.

I might not use such dramatic language as Paul who talked about fighting the good fight and being poured out as a libation, knowing he was about to be martyred. But I can echo that sense of being in the hands of God having responded to his call to serve him which first came to me as a tender 12 year old.

## Called to serve

A cartoon in the Church Times showed a vicar sitting at a desk piled high with papers. He was answering the phone: "Well, Mr Jones," he replies, 'you don't believe in organised religion, you say? You should come here; this is the most *disorganised* religion I have ever come across!'

I wonder why you come to church? I wonder why you are a church member? Is it just a nice place to socialise or a habit that you like to keep at the weekends? It might be, but I also hope it is because, in some way or other, you sense that it is God who calls you here. And then I wonder what you think your role is in church? Is it simply to support it by coming along, giving something and maybe doing a little bit to help out? Or do you see yourselves as the hands, feet, eyes and body of Christ, as St Theresa put it?

The fact is, that everyone who is baptised, is a minister in the Church. I don't mean a vicar or preacher like me, (I am an *ordained* minister). But you are all the people of God and as such, you also have a task. What is God calling you to do and be? Maybe what you do is enough, and God is happy with that.

But is there a voice deep inside you, which perhaps you resist? Is God calling you to serve in some further way? Is God even calling you to take on leadership in some way or other? Is he calling you to preach, or teach or offer pastoral ministry? If so, you need to pray and talk about it further. Let the wider Church test your call and then accept whatever that might be. You might not think yourself either capable or worthy. But then, remember Simon who became Peter; remember Saul who became Paul.

After all, *we* are the only plan Jesus has for his Church! We are imperfect, but Jesus can transform us by his power.