

Sts. Peter and Paul

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29 June, 2019

1st Reading Acts 12:1–11

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 34:2–3,4–5,6–7,8–9

2nd Reading 2 Timothy 4:6–8,17–18

Gospel Matthew 16:13–19

Today’s gospel makes it sound so easy. Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus grants Peter a boon, foretells the foundation of his Church, and how it will stand against the gates of the netherworld. It’s a simple story of faith and faith rewarded; one that is practically made for sound bites and the charismatic proclamation of the gospel as Good News.

And then there’s the reading from Acts. Peter is put in prison, with 16 guards to watch over him, double chains around his wrists, and at least two locked doors between him and the outside world. Herod clearly had heard about Peter’s previous escape from prison and was taking no chances. He does everything within his power to ensure that Peter would remain where he put him. And it’s still not enough. An angel comes and walks Peter out of prison as if none of Herod’s precautions were even there. It’s such an easy escape, that Peter himself thinks it must be a vision at first: it can’t be real. It’s only when the angel leaves and he finds himself outside the prison, in the midst of the city streets, that Peter comes to realize his escape is real. Once again, Peter’s faith has been rewarded. Being a follower of Jesus appears to be all sunshine and roses.

But of course, we know that is not true, and our second reading serves to remind us of that. Paul is writing from prison, indeed he is facing execution. There is to be no miraculous escape this time; no clever argument which wins over the authorities. However he ended up getting arrested this time, there is only one possible outcome. Rome has burned and Nero needs his scapegoats.

The certainty of death, however, doesn’t bring Paul to despair. He doesn’t curse or ask why Peter might have been miraculously saved from Herod while he awaits Nero’s “justice.” No, if anything Paul can be described as content. God has been with him as he preached Jesus to the Gentiles and Paul is satisfied that he has done what was asked of him. He is sure of the reward prepared for him. He doesn’t need to be rescued to feel God’s presence and can even take the time to encourage and console Timothy, reminding him that death is nothing more than the next step into eternity, an eternity with Christ.

It’s quite the contrast with the other readings, but that’s really only because of the way the Lectionary makes its selections. If we were to read on in the gospel, for instance, we would find that just a few short verses after today’s

selection ends, Jesus rebukes Peter as “Satan” and goes on to describe the costs of discipleship: taking up one’s cross and losing one’s life. The gospel message is good news, but it is not good news that everyone is ready to accept. Some will reject it for various reasons. And some of those reasons may even be our fault. Still, we are called, like Peter and Paul, to share that good news. Sometimes the way will be easy: like Peter we may be led by angels to unbelievable successes. Other times, however, the way will be hard, and it will be all we can do not to trip over our own feet. Either way, Jesus will be with us.

So, as we celebrate Peter and Paul today, let us ask God to give us the willing heart which we need to accept our successes with humility and our hardships with fortitude. The two greatest apostles have shown us the way, now it is our turn to walk it.