

The Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, A ✕ D 2008

Matthew 16:13-19 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 It's graphic, gory, even. You can try to shield your children from violent movies, movies filled with blood and gore. You can shield yourself from violence and bloodshed. But then you come to church on the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul. And there's blood everywhere. The feast days of the saints are not celebrations of their birthdays. They're usually their death days, or the days at least when we recall their deaths. If they were martyrs, that is, if they were killed for their refusal to deny the faith, the scene is even bloodier. For the feast days of martyrs, we decorate our churches in blood-red.

2 It'd be nicer if we could ignore blood or turn our eyes away from it, but blood is too pervasive in the history of salvation to ignore. When Adam and Eve realized their sin, they thought they could cover their shame with leaves. But bloodless sacrifices won't do, so God killed an animal and made clothes for them from its skin. When Cain's bloodless grain sacrifice was deemed unacceptable to the Lord, he killed his brother Abel, whose shed blood cried out to the Lord from the ground. When the Lord wanted to mark His people, he didn't use some spiritual mark. No, He had the men circumcised, marking them with the shedding of blood when they were only eight days old. And when the Angel of Death was to pass over the Israelites in slavery in Egypt, the Lord had them smear the blood of a lamb on their door frames. Blood everywhere.

3 The world would prefer a bloodless Jesus, too. They want a Jesus to soothe sadness and calm anxiety, a Jesus who will accept prayers addressed to anyone, a Jesus just as comfortable in a synagogue, in a mosque, or the golf course, or at a storefront as in a church. The world wants a Jesus who helps with investment and business decisions, who guides you in your pursuit of the American dream. A Jesus who will turn a blind eye to your sins is safer than a Jesus who dies on the cross for your sins. It's the cross, after all, that's most offensive.

4 Simon, to whom Jesus had given the name Peter, or "Rock," thought so, too. After his bold confession "You are the Christ" in today's Gospel lesson, he tried to keep Jesus from the cross. The verses immediately

after today's Gospel record that Jesus began to show His disciples "that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." So Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Peter wanted a bloodless Jesus, a Jesus not journeying toward the cross. But Jesus rebuked Peter as He would rebuke the world who wants a bloodless Jesus: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." The things of God are unavoidably bloody.

5 Saul, whom we later know as Paul, didn't mind the blood, per se. It was the teaching that Jesus, the One who died on the cross, was God, that irked Saul. While Saul was on his way to put to death Christians who confessed that the Crucified One was the Lord, the same Lord appeared to Saul. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Jesus rebuked Peter's hope that Jesus might be bloodless and Paul's confession that the bloody Jesus was not the Christ.

6 But both Peter and Paul learned better. Theirs was not a bloodless Jesus. Peter who rebuked Jesus, who denied knowing Him three times, was the first one the resurrected Jesus asked for by name. "Go, tell the disciples and Peter." Paul, who called himself the foremost of sinners, said he received mercy precisely because he, the foremost of sinners, was unable to earn his own salvation. "I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Tim 1:16). So we celebrate today, not their lives, but their deaths. We celebrate their deaths as ones willing to hold fast the faith they had received, even in the face of death. We celebrate their deaths as examples for our own deaths, that we, like Peter and Paul, and all whom the Lord holds steadfast in faith, might remain faithful unto death. Tradition holds that St. Peter, when sentenced to die a death by crucifixion, asked instead to be crucified upside down, considering himself unworthy to die as his Lord did. And St. Paul, as a Roman citizen, would have been spared the humiliation of crucifixion, and was probably beheaded instead.

7 Peter, Paul, Stephen, eleven of the twelve apostles, many of the earliest fathers of the church, limitless, unnamed Christians of the first four centuries of the church, and countless other Christians all over the world even today. These are the heroes of the faith. They are those who refused to reject the Lord's gift of faith even when death snarled in their faces. And so they died. They gave their lives and died the blessed death of

martyrdom, and yet we're reluctant to give even an hour a week to come to Bible class, or fifteen minutes a day for family or personal devotions, or a few hours a week to teach our children the faith. Repent of loving your life more than your Lord. Repent of seeking an unbloody Christianity, and repent of seeking an unbloody Jesus.

8 You simply cannot have Jesus without His blood. You can't have Him without the cross, without His suffering and death. Any other Jesus, a bloodless Jesus, a crossless Jesus, is, as He said, the hindrance of Satan, the things of men, not the things of God. He is the Christ, as Peter confessed. He's the Lord who came in the flesh to shed His blood. Flesh and blood has not revealed this, but the Father in Heaven has revealed His love for creation in the flesh and blood of Jesus. For Peter's sins, for Paul's sins, for your sins, He came to shed His blood on the tree of Calvary.

9 There is no forgiveness of sins, says the writer of Hebrews, without the shedding of blood. In Christ's blood is the forgiveness of sins. In His blood is your life. His blood hallows the water of the font; His blood courses through the word of the apostles from the pulpit; His blood flows from the mouth that declares your sins forgiven; and His blood fills the chalice from which He bids you drink for the forgiveness of your sins. "Every drop of this blood is an ocean of absolution for you...It is the blood that makes devils retreat, that moistens the lips of those who thirst for righteousness, that extinguishes the fires of sin that burn in the members of our flesh." (Bird, 75) In His blood is life for you. Life that enables you to confess with Peter, Paul, and the apostles and saints who have preceded you in death: "You are the Christ."

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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