

St. Peter the Apostle

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul states that he went to Jerusalem to see Peter. The text reads, '...after three years I, Paul, went up to Jerusalem to see Peter.' (Gal. 1:18).

It might at first appear to be an odd thing to start a sermon on the feast of St. Peter with a text from St. Paul. Normally one would expect to hear the preacher extolling the virtues of St. Peter on St. Peter's day which is of course a right and proper thing to do. But sometimes we can learn a great deal about a person by observing him in relation to a third party. Ideally it would be good if we could, by using a time machine, bring St. Paul into church today, and ask him, "How did you get on with St. Peter?"

St. Paul had never met Jesus in the flesh. He may possibly have seen him from a distance when Paul was a Law student in Jerusalem, he may even have heard him speak, but, unlike Peter, he had never lived with him, eaten with him, watched him at work, talked with him, seen him betrayed, even disowned him himself, and then, after the crucifixion, been forgiven by none other than the risen Christ himself. Who in all the world knew Jesus as Peter did? No one. Peter's experience of Jesus was quite unique. There has never been, there never could be anyone ever able to tell what Peter could tell about Jesus. For that one reason alone Paul knew that he had to meet Peter, to hear his first hand experience of Jesus of Nazareth; he had a mere fortnight with him to hear the story. And if we use our imagination, we can perhaps see Paul the barrister, or something like a barrister, sitting at the feet of Peter the fisherman from Galilee, drinking in the story, and all the while forming the

message in his fertile mind - the message which was to become the very heart of the Christian gospel for the world.

What lessons can we take away from this meeting of the fisherman and the lawyer?

First, there can be no sure Christian faith unless Jesus of Nazareth is at the centre of it. All too frequently people think, even if they do not say, "I'm alright Jack. I don't get drunk. I don't beat my wife. I don't fornicate. I don't fiddle my tax returns". This of course is all laudable. It would be a better world if more people could say the same. Our society would not be as sick as it is. But what makes a Christian a Christian, however, is not these negatives, but a person's positive attitude to Jesus Christ; and this is impossible unless we know about him - what he said, what he did, how he prayed. Our saviour is not a good conduct certificate which we award ourselves, but it is the man who lived in Galilee and Judea, was crucified, was buried when he died, and rose again. Paul had an overwhelming experience on the Damascus road, and three years meditation in Arabia after that; but he had to come to terms with the story of Jesus of Nazareth before he had any gospel to proclaim to the world. That is why he went up to Jerusalem to see Peter.

Secondly, we can learn from this event that Paul needed Peter and Peter needed Paul. They needed each other. Paul, that intelligent, argumentative, learned man stands for all that is outward looking, radical, and even shocking in the life of the Christian church. Paul would have supported the cause of innovation and renewal - the Alternative Service Book, the ecumenical movement, charismatic revival and lay ministry.

Peter on the other hand would stand for ancient traditions, for the historic threefold order of ministry. Peter would love the book of common prayer and would be suspicious about women Priests. This however is the point to grasp. Paul needed Peter (which is why he went to see him), and Peter had insights of vital importance to learn from Paul. Both are needed in the church.

Thirdly, personal and individual allegiance to Christ is insufficient without attachment to the church. Paul was always keen to claim the continuity of his personal experience of Christ. He found it necessary to go up to Jerusalem to see Peter, who was the leading Apostle of his time, in order to link himself to the church and to check his beliefs about Jesus in the light of the experience of others. If the question is asked, "Is it possible to be a Christian without being a member of the church?" the answer is "yes". What we should add however is to say that outside the church there is no safeguard against heresy. Outside the church the Christian faith becomes diluted and distorted. Paul made sure that this didn't happen to him and that again is why he went to see Peter.

This meeting between Paul and Peter was momentous for the whole history of the Christian church, momentous even for us. It shows that what makes for our eternal salvation is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; it shows that our different experiences of him are all needed in the church. Let us ground our faith in the right place, and let us recognise and value the different experiences of each other.