

God's Unstoppable Church

Acts 12.1-11, 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 17-18, Matthew 16.13-19

Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul

29 June 2025, St. Catherine's Anglican Chaplaincy

Today, June 29th, we celebrate Saints Peter and Paul, foundational leaders in our faith. As we consider their lives, our Bible readings reveal a powerful message: God is always with us, He shows us truth, and He gives us power. This power strengthens His Church against all challenges, both outside and within. Our Gospel from Matthew guides us in understanding this.

In the Gospel, Jesus asks his followers, "Who do people say I am?" After hearing various ideas, Jesus asks directly, "But who do *you* say I am?" Simon Peter, filled by God's Spirit, boldly confesses: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This is the most important belief we hold – who Jesus truly is, revealed by God, not human insight. Upon this profound truth, Jesus promises: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. The gates of Hades will not win against it. I will give you the keys to heaven's kingdom..."

Jesus was revealing a divine plan. Peter's new name, 'rock,' symbolizes the firm truth: Jesus is the Christ. On this confession, the Church is built – a spiritual house so strong no evil power can destroy it. "The gates of Hades" signify all forces of death and destruction, all that seeks to diminish God's light. Jesus promises these forces will not win. This assures us the Church will ultimately prevail, not by its own might, but by God's power.

This promise – that the gates of Hades will not win – comes alive vividly in our reading from Acts. We see Peter, a key leader, facing what looks like those very gates of Hades. King Herod, hostile to Christians, had killed James and now imprisoned Peter, intending a public execution. Peter was locked up, chained, and heavily guarded. From a human viewpoint, hope was gone as he slept, awaiting death. Yet, in this moment of helplessness, the Church prayed fervently.

And God answered. An angel appeared, light filled the cell, Peter's chains fell off, and doors opened by themselves. Peter simply walked out. This proves the "gates of Hades" cannot hold God's chosen. God's powerful hand saved Peter, ensuring the Church's work, begun by his confession, could continue. This story reminds us that even when our Church faces significant transitions and discernment, such as the current waiting for a successor to Archbishop Justin Welby in Canterbury, God's power is at work. Even when we feel vulnerable or unsure, like Peter asleep, God is working to fulfill His purpose.

Next, we look at Paul's letter to Timothy. Paul wrote this as he prepared for martyrdom. Like Peter, Paul lived a life of deep commitment and great hardship for Jesus. He says, "As for me, I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for me to leave has come." These are not words of despair, but of profound trust. He sees his life as a complete offering, his death a culmination, not an end. He states, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Paul's life was a constant struggle for justice and truth, a tireless race to share the Good News with all people. He confidently says, "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth." Paul, like Peter, experienced God's saving power. His trust was not in himself, but in the Lord who continually rescued him "from every evil attack" and would bring him "to his heavenly kingdom." He looked forward to a "crown of righteousness," God's just reward for his faithful, radical obedience.

So, what is the main idea across these stories? It is God's unwavering control and active presence with His Church and His chosen people. Peter's confession of Christ in Matthew is the "rock" on which the Church stands. Jesus promises this Church will withstand all forces opposing God's love and justice. Acts shows this promise: Peter is saved, proving God protects and guides those He calls, even through institutional transitions. And Paul, in 2 Timothy, embodies this enduring strength and faithfulness to the end, confident God will bring him to His kingdom.

On this Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, we celebrate not just two individuals, but the truth that God reveals Himself, calls all peoples to extraordinary tasks, empowers them, sustains them through pain, and ultimately ensures His Church's triumph. They faced imprisonment, persecution, and martyrdom. Yet, their stories are not about defeat, but God's victory. They remind us our faith is real, that the Church, built on Christ, is strong and resilient. The Lord truly stands by those who fight for righteousness and justice, and keep the faith, leading us into His unfolding future.

May their lives inspire us to deepen our confession of Christ, to pray fervently for our Church and each other, and to live with confidence. Whatever challenges we face—personally, globally, or in times of change, including the vital leadership succession in Canterbury—the Lord will stand by us, give us strength, and ultimately lead us to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.