

Today we are celebrating the solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul. This doesn't happen very often, but when it does, are we pushing Jesus to the side? Some people claim we are. Anytime we honor the saints, we are celebrating the way they allowed God to work through them to help spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Sometimes, as in the case of the solemnity of Mary the Mother of God which is celebrated as a holy day of obligation on January 1—the celebration of the saint teaches us something about Jesus. Mary the Mother of God reinforces the teaching that Jesus is fully human and fully divine—Jesus is the second person of the Holy who took on our human nature in the incarnation so that he could save us and open the gates of heaven for us.

How did God work through Saints Peter and Paul? The most obvious answer is that they are the two principal pillars of the Church founded by Christ. Jesus established his church upon the rock of Peter (Peter's name means "rock") and he called the Gentiles into his family primarily through the ministry of Saint Paul and his companions. We are an apostolic church. This means we trace our lineage back to Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles. The faith we practice today was handed on to us through those men and their successors. Jesus gave a share in his authority to Peter first and then to the other apostles so that they could build up the church on earth. That is the main reason why we honor Peter and Paul today.

There are other lessons we can take from them though. Jesus' choice of Peter, Paul, and the others wasn't exactly the obvious choice; at least from a human perspective. At times Peter was very open to the spirit of God—like in today's gospel—other times not so much. In fact, right after what we just heard, Jesus predicted his own passion, death, and resurrection and Peter rebuked him, to which Jesus replied, "Get behind me Satan. You are an obstacle to me." Jesus had a mission to accomplish—to rescue us from our captivity to Satan, sin, and death. Satan chose one of Peter's greatest moments to work through Peter to dangle a temptation in Jesus' path to avoid the way of the cross. That was not the last of Peter's mistakes; but Jesus never abandoned him or changed his mind about his choice.

Paul was one of the pillars of Judaism and a major persecutor of the new church after Pentecost. He was on his way to Damascus to persecute more followers of Jesus when he was knocked to the ground and told that he wasn't just persecuting a bunch of wayward Jews, he was persecuting Jesus himself.

He probably was not very friendly to pagan gentiles either. Not exactly the most obvious choice to become the “Apostle to the Gentiles.”

With both Peter and Paul, Jesus didn’t see only their failures, Jesus saw their potential. More accurately, he saw the potential that could come out of their failures. Paul wrote most eloquently about that. He wrote about how he had asked Jesus to remove a great thorn from his side. Jesus refused, saying “It is in your weakness that I am strong.” All of the saints probably had moments like that. That statement has a double meaning. First of all, it is when we are weak that we are most likely to realize that we need God; we cannot do everything on our own. In these times we become less resistant to the work God wants to do in us and through us. Secondly, it is through recognition of our weaknesses that our hard hearts become more like the merciful and compassionate heart of Jesus. when we finally recognize that we are not perfect, we become more compassionate towards the weaknesses and pain and suffering of others.

One final lesson that Peter and Paul—and Mary and Joseph and all of the saints can teach us—is to expect God to surprise us. No matter how unworthy we may feel or how unworthy others may appear to us, that tends to be exactly who God has work through. It is often in our greatest weaknesses that God can do his greatest works.

Saint Peter and Saint Paul, pray for us.