

Saints Peter and Paul are not unique in being coupled in a celebration – in the calendar of the Western church several other saints, indeed apostles, are so linked – for example, Ss Simon and Jude. Nor in sharing a common place of martyrdom or birthday into heaven, and that within a year or so of each other – Rome, during the persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero – but by their feast being celebrated as of the highest rank, a solemnity. This is historically due to the importance of the leader of the Roman church as being the custodian of the shrines and tombs of the two greatest apostles, Peter and Paul. The precedence of the See of Rome in the Western church, and its claims to being a patriarchal See, first in dignity, rest on this.

Yet Peter and Paul are something of an odd couple. Granted both - at least as presented in Luke's Acts – are central figures in the expansion of the church from Jerusalem into the Mediterranean world, yet both are quite flawed characters. Peter, ever impulsive, ever drawing back from his initial commitment, is more often like a candle in the wind than someone ablaze with the Spirit. Jesus, before and after his resurrection, has to draw Peter back to his mission of becoming a fisher of men, not relapsing into a mere fisherman. It is surely evidence of Jesus' sense of humour that he nicknames this fickle character, on whom he promises to build his church, as a rock – shifting sands might have been more accurate. And these character flaws persist – Paul, in his early Letter to the Galatians, talks of withstanding Cephas (Peter) to his face, in an argument over whether the gentile converts had to follow the full rigour of Jewish Law, provoked by Peter saying different things to different audiences in the hope of avoiding trouble. Yet Paul's relationship with Peter was not always confrontational. In the same letter he talks of journeying to Jerusalem, in the first flush of his conversion, to learn how Jesus was perceived by those who had accompanied him; and again, to seek the endorsement of Peter and other apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church for his mission and preaching to the gentiles. Paul himself was a controversial figure – his insistence that his gentile converts should not be bound by the full rigour of Jewish Law ignited the anger of those Jewish Christians who believed that Christianity should remain firmly rooted in Judaism. His rapidly changing companions reflect the difficulty of working with Paul. However, from this confrontation a consensus was reached, depicted by Luke in Acts in a lapidary phrase authorised by Peter and the other apostles and elders in Jerusalem which is the foundation charter of the church 'it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...' (Acts 15:28).

And in this surely lies their importance for us. Paul, adapting to different contexts and circumstances in order that the Good News might be proclaimed, and God's Word take root, but nonetheless seeking the endorsement of authoritative members in the nascent Christian church. Both are necessary. Their shared feast then reflects the importance of organic development – as celebrated by St John Henry Newman. It is important that those on the frontiers, inspired by the Spirit, have the freedom to take initiatives for the sake of the Gospel, but these initiatives have ultimately to be validated by the institution, the guardians of the tradition handed on from the apostles. Catholics interpret Scripture, God's Word, through the lens of tradition, which gives us the reading frame by which to interpret it correctly, in unity with those who have interpreted it before. But we also assert that God's Word is living: while the texts remain unchanged our reading of them differs, inasmuch as depending on the context in which we read, some parts of the texts will become particularly apt for our present circumstances, others become less relevant. The same of course is true of tradition. The basis, unchanging, of the tradition is how we might live godly lives, become holy, following the example of our fathers in the faith. Yet the context in which we do this, the problems which we are grappling with, inevitably change. We might think of the example of human slavery, tolerated in the early Christian centuries, now regarded as sinful folly. That is how tradition, too, is alive to us. The critics of the present successor of St Peter, who seem to wish to kill tradition by reducing it to a museum fossil, might do well to reflect on this. If we are to honour the two princes of the apostles, we must try to hold in creative tension the core truths of the faith, and how we might fruitfully live these out in new contexts.