

A sermon preached at  
**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**  
for the

## **Confirmation Service**

held on the

## **Feast of St Peter and St Paul**

Sunday 28 June 2009

by

## **Bishop Victoria Matthews**

Lection: Acts 12:1-11, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18, Matthew 16:13-19

If there ever was a feast to convince us of the diversity of the Body of Christ – that more than one kind of person is a welcome member of the Body and the Kingdom of God, it is the Feast of St Peter and St Paul.

It has often been said that impetuous Peter is appealing, while Paul is simply appalling, but in fact their differences tell us much about the love God in Christ and the all embracing love of God.

How fortunate therefore that this celebration of the sacrament of confirmation, in this inner city parish of St Luke's in the City, comes to us on this feast. It reminds us that God's redemption in Christ and the power of the Spirit is not dependent upon who we are and what we do, but is God's initiative and God's work. So with that in mind let us ask what we are doing here today.

Ros, Sarah and Annette are all coming to us seeking the laying on of hands with prayer for a deepening of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They are seeking to participate more fully in the Divine life.

What this means is that they are on a journey. A journey on which they are accompanied by God. A journey during which the relationship with God and other members of the Body of Christ will deepen and grow, and as a result they will change, blossom and flourish. Now don't misunderstand me, it isn't a Sunday School picnic. Parts of the journey are immensely difficult and at times you can even start believing that one is travelling solo. But one is not. It is a journey wherein one is shaped and reshaped to become a new creation to God's glory.

In the far north of Canada, my native land, in the Arctic, there are Inuit artists who carve the local soapstone into works of art. The sculptures usually reflect what the world around them looks like: ice houses, walruses, seals, hunters with harpoons, polar bears. The way the sculpture happens is intriguing. The artist collects pieces of soapstone for his/her art and lives with them for a period of time before commencing to carve and shape them. That is because the Inuit artist believes that inside the piece of soapstone there is already a work of art waiting to be released. So the artist works first to understand the true identity of the soapstone and then helps it come into being.

Building on that image of the artist working with the soapstone, we might say that one way of understanding confirmation and the action of the Holy Spirit is to think of the Holy Spirit as sculptor, fashioning Ros, Sarah and Annette into works of art for the Glory of God.

[Now I have to admit when I look in the bathroom mirror in the morning – not once, not even once have I ever thought, “What a work of art”, but you get the idea...]

Perhaps you are wondering what role faith and belief have in the process of becoming a work of art. In this morning's Gospel we heard Peter make a bold and courageous declaration of faith: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus affirms the declaration but also tells Peter that it is not his brilliance that has birthed the proclamation but God in heaven. Jesus then goes on to speak about the church being built on the rock of Peter's faith in Jesus. Again it is very clear that the real work is done by God in Christ and Peter's faith is at best, a partner, or to change the analogy, the soil in which the church grows.

Today however, is the Feast of Peter and Paul. Peter is obviously impetuous and blurts things out before really thinking things through. He is a bit like those who say in all honesty, “I have no idea what I think until I hear myself say it.” And it is abundantly clear that God can and does work with Peter and Peter's sort of people, for God's glory.

Paul on the other hand is a black and white sort of guy and an extremist at that. He goes from killing Christians to preaching Christ. It takes being knocked off his feet with temporary blindness and hearing the voice of Jesus speaking to him, to make him believe. But once he does, there is no looking back. Paul is a rational, logical thinker who nevertheless has mystical experiences. Paul tells people how to live their life and he has an opinion on most everything. But still Paul is rich soil for the grace of God to grow, and for the work of the Spirit. Something very beautiful is being formed in Paul by the Holy Spirit, the artist and sculptor. The Spirit is creating a work of art for the glory of God.

Ros, Sarah and Annette: God has been in your life, fashioning you from the time you were in your mother's womb. You are each a work of art in progress. But today you are making a choice to partner with the artist. Today, like Peter, Paul, Luke, Mary and Mary Magdalene, you are the recipient of the Holy Spirit given to you as a gift to assist you in becoming the person God wants you to be. Paul describes his life as a libation, an offering, being poured out on the altar of God's glory. May each of our lives be such a free will offering to God. But remember, whatever you make your gift to God – all you are and all you have and all you will become, remember, that is your response to God's love. For God's love has enfolded you and embraced you from before your birth and will continue, no matter what, into eternity.

So today take one more step towards becoming a work of art, but most of all, pause and give thanks to the artist.