

Not Taught, Revealed

a sermon preached on the

Feast of Saints Peter & Paul

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Acts 12:1-11, Galatians 1:11-20, Matthew 16:13-19

Today we celebrate as a pair those two giants in the life of the early church – indeed in the ongoing life of the church. Peter, the rock on whom the church is built, the keeper of the keys of the kingdom¹ – though best known perhaps by the masses as a consequence of all those trite Pearly Gates jokes. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, the first great missionary – though best known to the masses as a consequence of his apparently-rigid teachings on sex and sin. But what strikes me as most relevant for us today about these two figures is the origin and source of their faith – and thus the source of all their missionary endeavour.

Peter seems to have become something of a spokesperson for the discipleship band from early on, so it's not surprising that he was the one to answer Jesus' question, "But who do *you* say that I am?"² Peter apparently answers 'correctly': "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."³ But what Jesus says about this correct information is the vital key here: "Blessed are you... for flesh and blood has not revealed (*απεκαλύψεν apekalupsen*) this to you, but my Father in heaven."⁴ Peter did not figure this out for himself, nor was he taught this. It has been revealed to him. **Αποκαλυψις** *Apocalupsis*. Revelation. Direct encounter with the living God, immediate and unmediated first-hand experience of the Divine.

Somewhat later, after the horror of betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, Peter experiences a much more profound revelation – a revelation which was to set the church in a previously-unimaginable direction. In the two chapters of Acts which precede today's first reading we read of Peter's visionary experience while at prayer on the roof top at Joppa and its extraordinary consequences.⁵ The essence of this episode is this – the Jewish purity which Peter embodies and defends is overthrown by Divine revelation; that which Peter's religious tradition regarded as abomination is revealed by God to be made clean.⁶ So compelling is the revelation and its consequences that Peter is able to silence those in the Jerusalem church who attempt to perpetuate a narrow view of purity.⁷ Because of this revelation the uncircumcised are included. Peter does not figure this out for himself, neither is he taught this. Rather, he is transformed, and the Gentile mission truly begins through revelation, through direct experience of the Divine graciousness, creativity and fecundity.

Similarly, what makes Paul the compelling witness to the Christ is revelation, direct experience of the Divine. Paul's Damascus road encounter is, of course, best known. But though much is made of this highly publicised moment, in fact this is simply the beginning, the necessary derailing of Paul's zealous, scholarly and lethal religion. Luke gives us the impression that moments after this initial experience Paul was busy preaching on every street corner⁸ – and this view is the erroneous basis for many a dangerous proselytising so-called 'evangelist'. But Paul himself describes an entirely different situation: "I did not confer with any human being," he wrote to the church at Galatia, "nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once to Arabia, and afterwards to Damascus. Then after three years I did go

¹ Matthew 16:18-19
² Matthew 16:15
³ Matthew 16:16
⁴ Matthew 16:17
⁵ Acts 10:1 - 11:18
⁶ Acts 10:15
⁷ Acts 11:18
⁸ Acts 9:20

up to Jerusalem..."⁹ "For I want you to know "that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation (*αποκαλυψεως apokalypseōs*) of Jesus Christ."¹⁰

It is reasonable to assume that Paul's reaction to the Damascus road experience, departure for Arabia, was a prudent withdrawal into a silent contemplation on the mystery of the encounter. For only fools and empty vessels immediately start blabbing to all and sundry about an encounter with the Divine Mystery! Speaking of a what is likely to be a later and more profound Divine encounter, Paul remains tight-lipped: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat."¹¹

We are left in no doubt whatsoever that Paul has experienced the Divine Mystery, and that this encounter has become the source and ground of his entire life. He may have previously considered himself a 'Pharisee of Pharisees', yet it was not this scholarship and learning which was the core and basis for Paul's ministry. Like Peter, the foundation of his ministry is encounter, direct experience, revelation, *apocalupsis*. In fact, like all the great religious teachers down the ages, and not just the Christian ones, Peter's and Paul's authority is mystical. The great disciples are mystics, like their Brother and Lord.

That, I think, is the gift of Peter and Paul to us today. Neither the purity of our religion nor the thoroughness of our scholarly learning are sufficient – though, paradoxically, both are necessary. Of course the liturgy of the church and its tradition is necessary – Peter represents this aspect of religion for us. Of course the study of the Scriptures is necessary – Paul represents this aspect of religion for us. Without the liturgy of the church's tradition the scholar of the Bible can become superficial, legalistic, appallingly unenlightened, even violent. Without scholarship well-meaning prayerful people, taking texts literally, can fall into narrow fundamentalism or crude fanaticism. What lifts Paul out of legalistic and brutal scholarship, and what lifts Peter out of the fundamentalist purity of the liturgy of his religious tradition is revelation, Divine encounter. True religion is neither intellectual formula nor liturgical formula – its essence is mystical.

Encounter with the Divine, it needs to be pointed out at this point, is not merely for a few 'experts'. All persons are invited into encounter with the living God, all are invited into mystical encounter – that is our common humanity. Peter and Paul, among so many others down the Christian centuries, are simply guides and companions for the common human calling.

It also needs to be pointed out that Divine encounter cannot be conjured up or manufactured – this is a grave error perpetrated by aspects of that religion sometimes rather too loosely dubbed 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic'. Rather, as the witness of Peter and Paul reveals, revelation is pure gift, grace. Furthermore, generally speaking Divine encounter derails our previously-held religious structure, as the stories of both Peter and Paul amply illustrate.

So faith is not taught, but revealed. Peter's devout prayer is derailed by revelation. Paul's devout scholarship is derailed by revelation. And both are set on unexpected courses which, founded on revelation, are not of human origin. What this tells us is that we are to faithfully pray the liturgy of the church's tradition, and to faithfully study the Scriptures – but not to imagine that these pursuits, legitimate and necessary though they be, are sufficient. We are to press on faithfully, knowing that God will reveal Godself to us, each of us, at the appointed time and manner. Furthermore, as with Peter and Paul, we are to faithfully press on knowing that Divine revelation will derail us, completely transforming both our liturgy and our scholarship. Consequently, revelation, *apocalupsis*, experience of the Divine, will make us true evangelists, faithful witnesses to the Living Christ.

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⁹ Galatians 1:16b-18a

¹⁰ Galatians 1:11-12

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4