

SS Peter and Paul, Year A

Zech 4:1-6a,10b-end

Ps 125

Acts 12:1-11

Matt 16:13-19

In the first two readings, we have angels, dreams, visions, olive trees representing P and P, lamp stand as the light of the world. There's a bending of rules of time and space allowing visions and miraculous escapes. In the gospel, we have Elijah and Jeremiah mentioned in the same breath as Jesus. Again, a bending of time and space as Matthew brings the past into the present to emphasize the connexion between the heroes of Hebrew history and Jesus. And this happens in a place named in honour of Augustus Caesar and Herod's son Philip, in a town on the Golan heights, across the sea of Galilee from Tiberias and Nazareth, then as now one of the most hotly disputed territories of the world. Past and present.

This elastic space-time is at odds with our notion of linear time, where one thing leads to another [Alan Bennett's *History Boys*: 'history is just one fxxxing thing after another'] and is forgotten 'as a dream dies at the opening day', but it's very much part of middle-Eastern culture today. There, history is less like a train that travels unchanged as it travels along, and more like a rolling snowball: with each revolution the snowball gathers up more and more snow it's just run over. So the snowball of history gets bigger with each revolution, bringing all the past with it. And in truth, we know it too in such things as folk-memory and community-memory.

This is what the sacraments do too. 'Do this in remembrance of me' brings events in Jerusalem 2000 years ago into the present, and with them comes all that led up to them. In the consecration prayer we open the door of Dr Who's Tardis and find ourselves in the vastness of history. Every time the sacrament is celebrated, the past is compressed, sucked into the infinitely dense black hole of crucifixion, and propelled with infinite acceleration to create the glorious new universe. The entire cosmos gathered up and borne for an instant by the priest in the holy mystery.

Gathering up the past for re-launching into the future is what Patronal festivals are about too. We recall the past, we refresh the present in order to renew the future. It's a good time to recall and celebrate the past. In order to renew the future, we need to take stock of where we are. We need to ask what we do and be sure of why we do it. We need to take a good look at ourselves and ask ourselves what others see, in order to refresh the present.

There was a CoE questionnaire recently about what folk thought of us: according to the results, we are too respectable, too hypocritical, too irrelevant to life. We live in a la-la land of spineless niceness. If we want to have an impact on the world, it doesn't matter what we think of ourselves. What matters is what others think of us. This week's Church Times encourages us to talk to people in the churchyard – that is, people in the parish who are not here, and ask them what it is that fails to attract them. People in the parish who sneer at us, who reject us. If we want to reach them, what they think of us is more important than what we think of ourselves, because it's their perceptions that we have to work against.

What matters to Jesus in today's gospel is not what he thinks of himself, but what others thought of him. *Who do people say that I am?* Because it's only when what others see matches what we think of ourselves that we start to be authentic and attractive and charismatic. We have no need to pretend to be what we're not: people see through that. And this demands that we confront the past, acknowledge it publicly and bring it into the present. *Bringing the past into the present and the future.*

Peter is lovable, impetuous, unpredictable and passionate. He denied Jesus three times, and had to confront his past when he saw the risen Lord. Paul is loving, obsessive, hectoring, inconsistent, rambling and obscure. He was made to confront his past on the road to Damascus. Peter and Paul are humans like you and me. Or rather, you and I can be like Peter and Paul: using our humanity to work for the kingdom.

Sisters and brothers, let's use this Patronal to celebrate the past, bring it to the present, and ask for our own Damascus road experiences again and again to cleanse us from those bits of the past that hold us back, tearing the veil in our minds that we use to hide the things we wish to forget, that we are ashamed of. When we see ourselves as others see us, warts and all, we stand some chance of our hearts talking to theirs. Jesus' message can only be communicated from heart to heart, so when we expose ours, we stand some chance of winning theirs. This is great aspiration for us all at our Patronal Festival: recalling the past, and using searing honesty about ourselves to refresh the present, in order to renew the future. Then Christ's resurrection takes place within us, so that he becomes new in us and we in him.