

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 15 January 2023

Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR

The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name the triune God who invites us into a life of openness, justice, and compassion.

Many pieces come together today to focus our hearts and minds on how to live out God's love in our world.

It is the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, or the Second Sunday of Epiphanytide, continuing our season of light. The star that led the Magi to the birth of Jesus will be on our bulletins throughout the season, reminding us that Christ came, to quote today's reading from Isaiah, as a light to enlighten the nations – that is as illumination for all people everywhere, light which represents wisdom, guidance, and revelation.

Tomorrow is our national observance of Martin Luther King, Jr., a day when many people dedicate their time in service to those in need in their communities, as we all remember a great man who spoke with the words of Isaiah and Jesus and Gandhi to challenge us all to live out God's love and justice in our own place and time. The day I was with Dr King in person remains one of the highlights of my life, a day when I clearly saw God's light shine.

Then Wednesday begins the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, eight days when Christians around the world join in reflection and prayer, seeking true unity in our walk with Christ. This is a joint effort of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and so includes millions of Anglicans and Roman Catholics and Protestants of all sorts, working and praying together to be the Body of Christ in the world. The Octave begins with the Feast of the Confession of Saint Peter on January 18 and continues through the Conversion of Saint Paul on the 25th, thus making it an Octave, the traditional 8-day observance of truly major feasts. Each year a local group somewhere in the world is invited to choose a biblical focus that speaks to how they are seeing God's spirit calling them in their local situation and create devotional materials so that churches and individuals of all sorts can join in prayer and reflection and work to bind up the wounds dividing Christ's body. It happens that this year's focus comes from Isaiah, just like today's reading. "Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:17)

Do good and seek justice – that is our job as Christ's Body. And to do that we need to cooperate, to do it together. Isaiah invites us to live by the light of Christ that shines forth for all, and Paul reminds the Christians of Corinth, and us, that we live united, receiving the same blessings and the same call to be Christ's one body for the world.

Our Gospel reading takes us right back to the banks of the Jordan where we beheld the Theophany last week. John reminds his followers (and us) of that event when he saw God's spirit in apparent physical form, landing and staying on Jesus' head, revealing the reality of his divinity. And many of John's followers begin to turn to Jesus, to see what John sees, to become this body of disciples who will go on to become the Body of Christ.

Among those first followers we find Simon the fisherman, whom Jesus gives the nickname of Petros or 'rock'. This flawed volatile person becomes 'the rock on which the church is built'.

So our readings today and our celebrations this week weave together a tapestry portraying Christ's body in the world, 'the whole company of all faithful people' with our calling to be light bearers, shining the light of God's love everywhere, united in our calling to be a blessing to all people.

The saints who bracket our octave, Peter and Paul, both appear in our readings, one as a figure in the narrative, the other as the author of a letter to a Christian community. To me they are, as a pair, a

wonderful portrait of the unity we are called to, the unity we pray for during the Octave, the unity in service that Dr King continues to call us all to.

Peter and Paul were men of very different backgrounds, who had serious conflicts with one another, but whose work gave us the foundation for the community which became Christ's body in the world. These two have been uniquely celebrated by the Church. They are the only people other than the Blessed Virgin Mary to have more than one major feast in the liturgical year. They each have a singular feast during this Octave and then share a feast in June in which their martyrdoms in Rome, their deaths for the sake of the faith and the growing community of the faithful, are remembered together. They were uniquely important to the infant church for its founding, sustenance, and spread. As it says in the traditional Proper Preface for their June feast, "Peter raised up the Church from the faithful flock of Israel. Paul brought your call to the nations, and became the teacher of the world. Each in his chosen way gathered into unity the one family of Christ." Unlike so many saints these two are celebrated universally, claimed by all branches of the Church. Their veneration quickly spread throughout Christendom and all of the great preachers of the ancient church, including John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Ambrose left numerous sermons about this linked pair and their shared feast, their unity in great diversity.

Saints Peter and Paul were very different in age, education, background, experience, temperament, and calling. But both were of great service to God and to the Church. They are the alpha and omega of the apostles, Peter the one who, although not the very first to be called, came to be considered first among them, and Paul the only one to have been called after the crucifixion, as he said, seemingly 'born out of time'. One was the 'apostle of the circumcision', the other the 'apostle of the uncircumcision' or apostle to the gentiles. Peter was a Galilean fisherman, a worker of limited education in the intellectual tradition of Israel. Paul was a highly education intellectual and a Roman citizen, deeply knowledgeable in the scripture and traditions of Judaism, who lived off in Tarsus. Each had a specific and essential task. They had great difficulty getting along with one another, with explosive disagreements. But that does not matter. What matters is how God loved each of them in their uniqueness and from their very problematic characters made pillars for the Church, a Church for the ignorant and the wise, for the impatient and the peaceful, for the exuberant and the quiet, a Church for everyone who accepts the love of God and chooses to follow its path in their lives.

God loves us in our differences but is wounded by our divisions. I believe that varieties of being Church are as beloved of God as are varieties of people. But I also believe that true rifts in the Church, which cause us to accuse one another of being unfaithful to Christ, wound the sacred heart of God. When we condemn other churches or individuals to outer darkness, I believe that we are lopping off arms or legs or ears from the Body of Christ. The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity is our prayer that we all learn how to embrace one another, accept one another's experience of God and acknowledge one another as true, if flawed, members of the one Body. I love knowing that each day of the Octave I am reading the same readings and praying the same prayers as Christians all over the world, that for these eight days we are living as Christ's united Body – and from there can go on to live out what we have learned together about God's call to us

The spirit calls each of us and the spirit unites us and the spirit will give us the insight and strength to provide the loving hands of Christ in service to all in any need.

Now I will conclude with a collect for Peter and Paul's shared feast in June:

Almighty God, whose blessed apostles Peter and Paul glorified you by their martyrdom: Grant that your Church, instructed by their teaching and example, and knit together in unity by your Spirit, may ever stand firm upon the one foundation, which is Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.