

SUPERB YET IMPERFECT LEADERS: PETER AND PAUL

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A story is told of James Duhig, a famous former archbishop of Brisbane. One parish was never satisfied with their priest. So the archbishop kept replacing him. But the people kept complaining. The archbishop got so exasperated that he went out to the parish and challenged the parishioners: *'If I were able to send you Jesus Christ himself, would you accept him?'*

In the New Testament in general and the gospels in particular, Peter is far from perfect. On the contrary, he's impetuous (e.g. Mk 14:29; Mt 14:28-31) though honest. Although decisively and enthusiastically committed to Jesus, he's weak and sinful, prone to fear and doubts, as when he tries to walk to Jesus on water (Mt 14:28-31). He tends to put his foot in his mouth and gets Jesus wrong again and again (Mk 8:31-33; 9:5-6; Jn 13:6-11; 18:10-11). He sleeps through the agony in the garden (Mk 14:37-41). He's ticked off by Jesus, who even calls him *'Satan'* for getting in the road of Jesus' mission (Mk 8:33; Mt 16:23). He tries to follow Jesus on his way to Calvary, but at a safe distance. In the end he blatantly denies that he knows Jesus or has had anything to do with him (Mk 14:66-72). Paul accuses him *'to his face'* of being inconsistent and hypocritical (Gal 2:11-14).

But the NT equally asserts Peter's strengths. It's Jesus who renames him *Cephas* (Peter - rock). He's one of the first disciples Jesus calls to follow him (Mk 1:16 par) and become fishers of people (Lk 5: 1-11). He regularly speaks for the other apostles. He's one of the inner circle Jesus takes to witness certain happenings, e.g. the Transfiguration. To him is revealed the true identity of Jesus (Mk 9:2-8 par), although he misinterprets the meaning of *'messiah'*. It's to him that the risen Jesus appears first (1 Cor 15:5). While Paul speaks of Peter as sent to Jewish Christians (Gal 2:7), his influence among Gentiles too is considerable (1 Cor 1:12; 1 Peter 1:1). A wonderful scene in Jn 21:15-17 shows Peter declaring his love for Jesus three times (a turn-around from his triple denial). Jesus then makes him the chief shepherd of his flock (cf. Lk 22:31-32). In the end Peter, who by then (c.64) is in Rome, lays down his life for Jesus. (A tradition has him crucified like Jesus, but upside down).

Ancient sources suggest that Paul was probably hook-nosed and balding. But whatever obstacle that may have been to attractive leadership, it was surely offset by his sheer commitment and zeal, courage and endurance, that culminated in his death too as a martyr in Rome. These character traits shine through this passage in particular:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty,

often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor 11:24-28).

On the other hand, in his zeal to protect the purity of faith of his Corinthian Christians, Paul defends himself from attacks on him by his opponents, whom he labels, seemingly sarcastically, as *'these super-apostles'* (2 Cor 11:5), but who are really *'false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ'* (v.13). More generally, there's a hint here that he may have been too quick to keep asserting his authority as an apostle, and that his use of authority was too often divisive rather than a source of unity. For example, in his arguments with those who pushed for Christians to keep the whole Jewish law, including circumcision, he sneers at them as *'dogs'* and *'evil workers'* (Phil 3:2)

So, if these pillars of the Church didn't have it all together in every way, how real or unreal, how fair or unfair, how kind or unkind, are judgments about priests, and, for that matter, other leaders in pastoral care today? Recently, Popes John XXIII and John Paul II were canonised together. Both have been heroes in the life of the Church. Both have practised Christian virtues to a heroic degree. But their recognition as saints is not saying that they have been either perfect Christians or perfect popes. But did they have to be? After all, both Peter and Paul showed a sense of themselves as *'reconciled sinners'*, as when Paul observes, on the one hand - referring to his fragility as like a piece of pottery - *'we have this treasure in clay jars'* (2 Cor 4:7), and, on the other hand, *'I can do all things through him who strengthens me'* (Phil 4:13).

So, in the matter of realistic expectations of both my brother priests and myself, I draw some guidance, inspiration and comfort from Henri Nouwen's description of a minister of Christ and his Church as a *'wounded healer'*. What works, he argues convincingly, is not superiority and supremacy, knowing it all and having it all, but prayerful empathy, compassion and mercy, as illustrated day after day by our Good Pope Francis.