



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for the Feast of SS Peter & Paul (29<sup>th</sup> June) 2026

Under the rules of the Common Worship calendar, today's festival - Saints Peter and Paul - can celebrate just Saint Peter: presumably on the grounds that Saint Paul has his very own day for the commemoration of his Conversion.

Yet, for the most part, both men share today. It is not unique for Apostles to be yoked together for their feasts - Saints Philip and James, of course, as well as Saints Simon and Jude. However, there is no impetus from the New Testament texts to assign Peter and Paul a shared festival. Indeed, so it seems, theirs' was not always an easy relationship: though, presumably they have resolved their differences now that they rejoice in Heaven. In fact, it is those differences, which provide a theological rationale for keeping a joint feast for them.

The *Magnificat* antiphon, which I sung last evening in front of a congregation silenced by admiration at my musical accomplishment with most of the right notes and almost in the right order, they are described as, "Most glorious Apostles, of holy Church the pillars;" and the Office Hymn, similarly a solo by the *Officiant*, spoke of them as, "Twin olive branches."

The point of referring to these texts is to emphasise that like love and marriage in the once popular song, the two of them belong together, each restraining constraining the other and thus promoting a synthesis of their two perspectives, which saw the Church's insight in her Faith grow - not just during the earthly lifetimes of the pair, but in subsequent reflexion as well.

Peter and Paul represent what we might describe rather loosely as the thesis and antithesis, which produce the synthesis of Catholic Orthodoxy. Broadly speaking, Peter stands for the Jewish inheritance from which Christianity emerged and without which the foundations of our Faith are feeble. Saint Paul, on the other hand, embodies the insertion of non-Jewish philosophical ideas as the Gentile mission gathered pace. We might alternatively characterise this as a distinction between discipline and adherence to the inherited tradition, on the one hand, and the place of experience in the encounter of an incarnate Church with the world and its events.

These two poles of inspiration are in constant dialogue within the life of the Church and the development of her theology; and to some extent the balance between them shifts. Over the centuries, we have embedded some firm elements of the Tradition, which cannot be set aside; but even then, the conversation can broaden within that framework to encompass new experiences without compromising the settled rule of Faith.

These two principles are, to splice the sentiments of the Office Hymn and the antiphon, the twin pillars of the Church's search for understanding her identity and purpose; and rather to obfuscate the analogy, to use the insight of the late Esther de Vaal it is the creative tension that their encounter generates, which enables us, as it were, to keep up with history: to expand our theological horizons as we seek to promote the Gospel in our own context.

This was a discussion, which started between the two men, whose memory we honour today as we read in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles; but over the centuries, others have taken over the debate, which continues to this day. In observing together the feasts of two men, whose relationship was uneasy, we acknowledge the challenge of understanding our mission in the world: one which remains apostolically faithful to the inheritance of Faith whilst acknowledging God's Presence in the contemporary society in which He has set us.