

Two strong opinionated men.

Peter, the man of action, forthright, impulsive, the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

Paul, a born leader, skilled orator, with a sharp wit and the rhetoric of a top barrister, the ambassador for Christ.

Rocks don't cry. And Ambassadors avoid anything that makes them look foolish.

This rock cried and this ambassador was prepared to look foolish.

Peter wept when he realised how quickly he had broken his promise in order to save his own skin, wept at how he had denied knowing Jesus, not just once, but three times. Wept as he knew what was happening, but could not even join the women at the place of execution. Could not bear to watch.

Paul knew that what he preached was foolish in the eyes of the world; only a fool would repeatedly risk imprisonment, risk beatings and shipwrecks to teach people that God, all-powerful, all-knowing God, endured shame and humiliation and death for us.

Two strong men who underwent complete a change of heart, whose lives were completely transformed by the death of Christ.

When did Peter realise that Jesus was not calling him to be an inanimate, unfeeling, unchanging, unmovable rock but a living stone?

Peter writes in his letter to the exiles of the Dispersion,

'come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourself be built into a spiritual house, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Living stones can cry. Living stones can be hurt. Living stones can be afraid. Living stones can get things wrong. But they can, despite this, offer themselves to be used as God wills.

Peter got things so very wrong, but above all he could not understand why Jesus had to suffer and die. In his mind everything depended upon Jesus being alive and well.

The rock could not become the rock on which the church was built until he knew that he had failed. Until he knew and understood the limitations of his faith. Until he ceased to be afraid of death. Until he knew that he was trusted despite these failings. Until he became truly alive.

Peter the rock had to become a living stone, a living rock, learning patience, learning humility, learning the way of suffering.

Saul too had to learn. Saul, the tireless persecutor of Christians, for whom the letter of the law was all important, who could see precisely what was wrong with everyone else, had to lose his sight to

see God. He had to enter that darkness where there is no certainty, he had to be ministered to by one of the group whom he had persecuted. And then he too learnt shame, humility, understood that he had got things terribly wrong, and found the power and healing of forgiveness. Like Peter he changed, he became truly alive. He could feel his own and other's pain, and he could sense the pain of God.

Two strong men who had to learn weakness before they could use their strength for the benefit of others. They had to accept their failings, and more than that, the failings of the institutions in which they placed their trust.

It is something we too have to work at, and the more we become involved with any human institution, the harder it can become, even if that institution is the church. We put our trust in them. But we shouldn't. Our trust is in the Lord. We put our trust in ourselves, in the work we do, the hours we spend. But we shouldn't. Our trust is in the Lord.

The rather scary and humbling thing is that God already puts his trust in us. Just as he gave to Peter the keys to the Kingdom of heaven before Peter disowned him, so we are trusted to be what God wants us to be, to care for each other, to care for all of God's creation, to be co-creators, bringing peace and harmony and wellbeing to the whole earth.

Can God be so naïve as to place his trust in this way?

Not naïve, but overwhelmingly generous. He knows what we could do, what we could achieve, what this world might be like. And again and again he will suffer the pain of rejection, of humiliation, of the nails and the spear, and the agony and loneliness of separation and death, because that is the cost of giving us freedom. He gives us the opportunity to show our full stature, our total strength, the strength that can only be manifest when we have learnt our weakness and capacity for failure.

Peter and Paul were strong opinionated men. Natural leaders each in their different way. Such leaders have found their niche in every age, leaders who have not learnt the lesson of God's love. Peter has his image of how the messiah should be and desperately wanted to protect that, even though that would have prevented Jesus doing God's will. Saul felt he knew what was right, what would keep the faith pure, he persecuted in the name of his faith. How often have we seen that happen throughout history. Today, sometimes it is

easier to spot such fanatics in those of another faith than in our own, but every faith has its fanatics.

But Peter and Paul changed. They were still strong opinionated leaders, but they had learnt shame, repentance, forgiveness, and in that state of humility, they knew that only God should ever receive the glory.

As together we work to build up this church, may we learn how to use our skills, our talents and our strengths in humility, in service, and to God's glory. Amen.