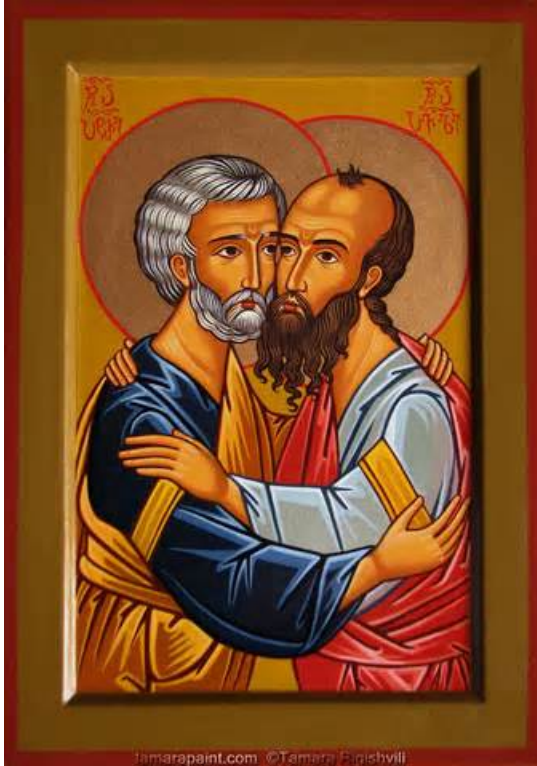


Two Sinners and God's Mercy



For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Tim 4:6-8)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matt 16:13-19)

I can still see his face, expressing pain and regret. He was sitting in the first pew of our small church. He was the backbone of that small Christian community and we thought we could rely on him. Yet, when the pro-Indonesian militia came, he disappeared. With his position in the village he could speak on our behalf. Yet, he got scared. He simply ran away.

He is the most senior Muslim cleric in one of the

Middle Eastern countries. His influence is enormous and his words reach millions. In one of his sermon he called on Muslims to stand out and make it their goal to wipe all Christians out of the Middle East.

Peter and Paul, two figures in whose lives God's mercy triumphed over the power of sin. Peter represents all those who out of fear or different personal reasons deny their faith. Paul stands for all who in

the name of religion threaten the lives of others.

The Gospel of Matthew has this severe warning against those who deny Jesus: “whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:33). Yet, Peter did it. “But he[Peter] began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know this man of whom you speak’”(Mk 14:71).

The letter of John says: “Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:10-11). Paul, despite all his Scriptural knowledge, was in darkness. Luke in such a way describes Paul’s attitude towards other fellow Jews who believed in Jesus. “Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Paul himself testifies that he persecuted those who believed in Jesus (1 Cor 15:9, Philippians 3:6). It is truly amazing how God in His mercy changed them into the vehicles of His grace and gave them courage to defend with their lives what they at first denied and tried to destroy.

Christian life tend to be divided into two stages: before and after meeting Christ. The story of Peter and Paul divides life differently: before and after realizing the power of sin in once life. Fear and zeal. Peter, overtaken by fear, denied the One he promised to stand by even if the others would leave Him. Paul, zealous for the religious tradition, was even ready to see people being killed. When the realization of their own powerlessness and failure dawned on them the old life ended and the new was about to begin. One cried; one got blind. Both of them felt terribly guilty over their past. Both of them, again and again, confessed their sins. No gospel omits the story of Peter’s denial and Paul in his three letters writes that he persecuted the Church (1 Cor 15:9, Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). Yet, God’s mercy triumphed over the power of sin. Peter got courage to stand for Jesus. Paul lost his taste for persecuting others and join the ranks of those who were being persecuted for their faith in

Jesus.

There is a lesson for all of us here. First of all, committing your life to Jesus does not guarantee that you will not deny Him. The world is full of lapsed Christians and those who in the moment of weakness gave up their faith. Yet, it does not necessary mean that all is lost. Failure helps to realize our need for God. It is only by His grace that we stand. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” (Psalm 127:1). Jesus made it clear: “without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). God’s mercy will succeed where your own power has failed. Therefore, never despair. Even if Satan himself quoted the Scriptures against you, do not listen. “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). God’s mercy revealed to us in Jesus’ death is the most life-changing message the history of the world would ever have.

Second, be aware of religious indoctrination. It can brainwash you into believing that destroying, hurting or harming others can be the measure of your faith. It is not. It only proves that you walk in darkness and thick blindness covers your eyes. Such condition is extremely serious, but God’s light can penetrate even darkness, as the Psalm says: “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Psalm 139:12). Jesus says: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Her name is Meriam Ibrahim. She is a Sudanese Christian sentenced to death for abandoning her Islamic faith and refusing to renounce Christianity. His name is Umar Mulinde, a pastor from Uganda. He was a leader of a Muslim community, but on Easter Sunday 1993 has become a Christian. Peter and Paul. Their story continues in the lives of contemporary believers in Christ. The Church is being built, out of living stones, adding brothers and sisters from different parts of the world, who confess the faith of Peter and Paul that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Amen.