

June 29<sup>th</sup> is the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. As important as this Holy Day is – and this is the sort of special parish where a few people may have come today to celebrate these great saints and stumbled on to an ordination – my guess is that most of you are gathered tonight to witness and celebrate the ordination of Christian Wood to the priesthood. I think I can speak for everyone here, when I say, “It’s about time.”

The examples of Peter and Paul offer a good starting point to look at the priesthood. But first, I should introduce myself. My name is Matthew Mead. I am the rector of the Parish of Christ the Redeemer in Pelham, New York. I’ve been friends with Chris and his wife Kate since our days together as Conferees and later as staff members of the Saint Michael’s Conference. My wife, Nicole, who is also a Saint Michael’s alum, is Chris’ cousin. Chris and I go pretty far back, and I could tell you plenty of stories about hilarious skits at Saint Michael’s or late night adventures in New York City, but not tonight. Let’s talk about Peter and Paul and what this celebration of those saints might mean to us tonight and for Chris as he begins his journey as a priest.

The joint celebration of Peter and Paul on June 29 is one of the great ironies of the church calendar. In life, these apostles were very different. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that he has been entrusted with the Gospel to the Gentiles, while Peter with the Gospel to the circumcised. Though called to different ministries, they were both good shepherds, entrusted by Jesus to tend and feed the flocks they had been given, and each did that.

I use the word shepherd intentionally because there is a pastoral image that runs through our readings tonight. Ezekiel speaks of the Lord who cares for his people, comparing God’s relationship to his people to the relationship a shepherd has for his sheep: tending to their needs, feeding them, protecting them, and seeking and bringing back to the fold any who have gotten lost or strayed away. Ezekiel is not the only one to use that image. In Genesis, Jacob speaks about the Lord as “The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.” It appears in other places as well, most notably as the start of the well known Psalm that begins, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

The kings of Israel and Judah were also granted that title, instructed by the Lord to serve as shepherds for his people. Most of the kings didn’t do such a good job at that, and the prophets referred to them as bad shepherds who had mistreated God’s sheep and scattered his flock. Those same prophets looked ahead to a time when the Lord would raise up true leaders, as Jeremiah says: “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”

They looked ahead to Jesus who took on this identity and described himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep so well that they know the sounds of his voice, and knows all of them by name. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who calls us to himself no matter where we are, like he called Lazarus who heard his name and walked out of the tomb to be with Jesus.

The title of shepherd has been adopted by the church, usually reserved for Bishops – and it is no coincidence that only the Bishop may carry the Pastoral Staff. I need to be cautious about what I say here because there is a Bishop right behind me, but I think the imagery of what a shepherd does, if not the title, can apply to priests. The commission given by Jesus to Peter on the beach is the same commission given to you today Chris. Feed Jesus’ lambs. Tend Jesus’ sheep. Feed Jesus’ sheep. If you do that, you will be a good shepherd of Christ’s flock, following in the footsteps of Peter and Paul.

How does an Episcopal Priest do that?

The obvious one is celebrating the Eucharist. Make it your business to celebrate or attend the Eucharist, at the very least, every Sunday and on every major Holy Day. As a priest you are ordained to celebrate the Sacraments for the people of God. Feed the lambs of God with the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Feed them in this place and wherever your ministry takes you. And when you are not called to preside at Jesus' table, make sure you are fed because you too are part of Jesus' flock and fold.

Second, say your prayers and read your bible every day. Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. One of the greatest gifts the church has given us is the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer. The Office is prayed at this church each day. Go to it. If you aren't in the church or you are off, carve time out to say it. When you are a rector, offer it, even if nobody else comes. The Scriptures and the prayers of the saints will become good friends, and the fruit that they bear in your heart and mind will feed your ministry and those you serve.

Third, make a regular Sacramental Confession. Peter denied Jesus three times, and his penance for that denial included confessing his love for Jesus three times. Regular, honest, self examination will serve you well, and it will serve the people under your care. Like Saint Peter, you will be an example that every one of us is called to true repentance for the sins that we commit. The example that you set will also enable you to preach honestly about sin and the forgiveness that we have in Jesus Christ.

Lastly, tithe: 10% off the top. Nicole and I tithe on our salaries, and we started doing that when we got married twelve years ago. Tithing isn't one of the Ten Commandments, but it is the Biblical principal that the Episcopal Church affirms and recommends. If you tithe, you can speak honestly about Christian stewardship, the challenge that comes with changes in careers, incomes, or even the loss of a job. We've been through all of those ups and downs, and the money may increase or decrease, but we have remained at 10%, and I have always been able to say "join me" to my congregation. Every dollar given to a church is used to feed God's people, by providing them a place to worship and practice ministry, staff to lead and assist them, and programs that will help them grow their faith.

These four points aren't original. My father, the Rev. Andrew Mead, who is an Episcopal Priest, and who knows Chris very well, calls those the "four points of [his] quadrilateral relation with God by which the Lord has sustained [him] all these years: Holy Communion, the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer, Sacramental Confession, and Tithing." My dad commended them to me, they work, and I pass them on to you, Chris. But not only to you; the example set by a good priest isn't about placing him on a pedestal but about leading the entire flock to a life of holiness. Holy Communion, Daily Prayer, Confession, and Tithing – these are as important to all Christians as they are to the Christian who is being ordained tonight.

For those of you who know Chris, you know that he is already doing these things pretty well, and being at the Church of the Redeemer will be a great support for him as he begins his journey as a priest. I can tell you from experience that the support of other clergy on staff, the guidance of an excellent mentor like Father Robinson, and a rich liturgical schedule will make it easier to form good habits in these four areas. Form those habits now, because your priestly ministry will lead you to

places without such strong support. There will be times when celebrating the Eucharist on a Holy Day, saying the Daily Office alone on a random weekday, carving out time to make and finding a priest to hear your Confession, and tithing on an income that seems to be smaller each year your kids grow will be more difficult than it is right now. In the journey you are embarking on Holy Communion, the Daily Office, Confession, and Tithing will feed you and nourish your ministry, and will allow you to feed Jesus' sheep, tend his lambs, and be a good shepherd of the Lord's flock.

I love being a priest, and I'm thrilled you are joining me in this ministry. You are embarking on an amazing adventure. Have fun, and remember that your call comes from Jesus Christ. Feed his lambs. Tend his sheep. Feed his sheep.

May God our Father bless you in and nourish you in your priestly ministry, may the Holy Spirit help you discern and build up the gifts of those you tend and feed, and may the joy that the apostles had when they ate on the beach with the risen Lord Jesus be the joy that you have whenever you are blessed to preside at Jesus' table.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.