

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**O**pen a bible at the center of your group and pray together to begin.

**LEADER:** Let us bless the Holy One at all times.

**ALL:** God's steadfast love never ceases; God's mercies, new each morning.

**LEADER:** Loving God, may we recognize like Peter that Jesus is the Christ.

**ALL:** The Son of the Living God.

**LEADER:** May we finish the race like Paul.

**ALL:** May we keep the faith as he did.

**LEADER:** Inspire us to live and spread the gospel like the apostles Peter and Paul.

**ALL:** Stand by us, Jesus, as you stood by them and give us strength.

**P**eter and Paul give their lives tirelessly to spread faith in Jesus, his teachings, in the power of his wholehearted love, and the promise of new life with God in his resurrection. We know their weaknesses as well as their strengths; their failings and their insights live on in the pages of the New Testament.

Peter blunders his way through Discipleship 101 and learns humility the hard way by overpromising his loyalty. Paul persecutes the early Christians in Jerusalem and sets out to do the same in Damascus. Both men have to grow beyond drawing the sword in violence.

The scriptures record that after his resurrection Jesus appears to both Peter and Paul.

They have firsthand experience of Jesus' continuing presence. Both give their lives to finding words that express their joy and its promise and invite hearers into Jesus' transforming presence. These encounters change everything and stretch the apostles' vision to the ends of the earth.

**B**oth Peter and Paul become men who live in the Spirit. Both model the evangelizers Pope Francis now calls all of us to be.

For Pope Francis evangelization is not head-to-head competition with other religions, but showing forth the joy of knowing Jesus. It is God's love for us blossoming in our loving one another. He insists we cannot help but share this joy.

In the *Joy of the Gospel* Francis recalls that at Jesus' birth angels bring the shepherds news of great joy that is for all people (#23). The Church is not missionary in order to preserve itself but to transform the world through love and healing, through walking with those in need and struggle.

● What joy in the gospel do you experience and share?



Peter and Paul before the throne of God, Basilica San Praxedes, Rome, Italy, 9th century mosaics.

# GOSPEL

## Peter recognizes Jesus is the Messiah.

**NARRATOR:** When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples this question.

**JESUS:** Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

**DISCIPLES:** Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

**JESUS:** But who do you say that I am?

**SIMON PETER:** You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

**JESUS:** Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. So I say to



you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matthew 16.13-19

Peter speaks out in an intuitive flash of grace. Perhaps he is an extrovert who responds and thinks out loud. Jesus blesses Peter for his insight and witness and affirms Peter's quick response is no foolish wishful thinking but an insight God has revealed.

However, although Peter professes faith in Jesus quickly, he requires more time and experience to become the firm believer on whom Jesus counts as the sure foundation of his new community. Accompanying Jesus as a disciple keeps challenging Peter's understanding.

Just one verse after Sunday's gospel Jesus predicts he will suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised up. Peter responds in another intuitive flash. "God forbid it. This must never happen to you." Jesus admonishes Peter for thinking only in human terms. "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me."

At the transfiguration when Peter sees Jesus with Moses and Elijah, he responds by wanting to build dwellings for each of them. He wants to capture and preserve the glory moment.

In the garden after the last supper and before Jesus' arrest, Peter keeps falling asleep instead of watching and praying with Jesus. Peter denies that he knows Jesus rather than put himself at risk when servants in the high priest courtyard suggest he is Jesus' follower.

John's gospel adds an encounter between Peter and the risen Jesus, in which Jesus three times asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter says, "Lord, you know that I love you." Scholar Raymond Brown thinks Jesus repeats the question to

## Peter and Paul spread the gospel.

**P**eter is one of the first persons Jesus calls to follow him, hear his teachings, and witness his actions. Peter becomes one of the twelve Jesus chooses and commissions as apostles or missionaries to continue his work. The risen Jesus appears to him. Peter is an eyewitness of the message of the gospel from beginning to end.

Paul never meets Jesus during his lifetime. He becomes a Christian after the risen Jesus appears to him on the road to Damascus. The appearance knocks Paul to the ground and blinds him for three days. Paul, whose name

at the time was Saul, hears a voice that redirects his energies from persecuting Christians to becoming one.

Sunday's gospel spotlights Peter in a breakthrough moment. He answers the question that Jesus asks and we all must answer—Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks this question of all his disciples, but Peter alone answers and speaks for the rest, "You are the messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter concludes from seeing Jesus heal the sick and multiply loaves to feed thousands that Jesus is Israel's long awaited Messiah.





**A statue of Peter that visitors to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome venerate by touching the toes.**

echo the three times Peter denies knowing him.

After Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Peter becomes the leader Jesus blesses in this gospel. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit sets Peter's tongue afire. Peter stays open to the Spirit and preaches Jesus' good news all the way to Rome, where he was martyred in the middle 60s.

- How are Peter's struggles like your own today?
- What makes Peter a leader you would follow?

**B**orn in Tarsus, the New Testament introduces Paul only in the Acts of the Apostles, when as Saul he persecutes the new Christian community in Jerusalem and drags believers to jail. Paul is a passionate activist, who pours himself out in all he does. After his vision of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul becomes Paul, who pours himself out in telling others about Jesus.



**A mosaic in Berea, Greece, honoring Paul.**

In Sunday's second reading Paul makes his famous statement, "I have fought the good fight." The word in Greek is *agona*,

the root of the English word *agony*, which connotes the strain, struggle, and suffering of giving one's all in an athletic contest. Zeal to spread Jesus' good news to the Gentiles animates Paul over more than two decades.

In Sunday's second reading, Paul writes from prison, looking back on his missionary work as he awaits his trial. To follow the footsteps of Paul, I rode 5,000 miles on a bus, traversing Turkey and Greece to visit the places he established Christian communities. Paul journeyed by ship and by foot to populated metropolitan areas where his preaching could reach many. Pious Jews more than once chased him out of town after he preached Jesus' message in their synagogues. He becomes the advocate for welcoming Gentiles as Christians.

Paul walks up and down mountains, sails the seas, and experiences shipwreck. He visits Iconium, Derbe, Colossae, Pergamum, Ephesus, Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and ultimately Rome, where he was martyred in AD 64.

Paul pours himself out as a tireless pastor among Gentiles. We know many people in the early Christian communities by name because Paul greets them or talks about them in his letters.

Educated as a rabbi, Paul wrestles with his experience of Jesus' presence with him and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the communities. In his theology Paul insists the crucified Jesus is the wisdom and power of God with whom we Christians live in inseparable union. "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" he writes to the Romans (8.35).

CHARITY

DO SOMETHING

JUSTICE

- Who is new in your parish community? How might you and your family welcome and befriend them? What parish activities might you involve family members in?

## Paul pours himself out.

I, Paul, am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.

The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

2Timothy 4.6-8, 17-18

- What has been important enough for you to agonize through it?
- What inspires you about Paul as a preacher and pastor?



## The community prays Peter out of jail.

Luke writes the Acts of the Apostles as a sequel to his gospel. Peter, James, and John lead the Christian community in Jerusalem. The apostles heal people as Jesus did and preach his resurrection from the dead. Their preaching both wins believers and antagonizes faithful Jews.

In Acts 12 King Herod persecutes the Christians in Jerusalem and martyrs James. The king then imprisons Peter during the same Passover time Jesus was arrested and put to death. Herod intends to leave Peter's fate to his antagonist, but the prayer of the community rescues him.

The spread of faith in Jesus proves unstoppable. This is the message of Sunday's first reading, which describes an angel freeing Peter from prison.

## An angel frees Peter.

In those days, King Herod laid hands upon some members of the church to harm them. He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword, and when he saw that this was pleasing to the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. It was the feast of Unleavened Bread. Herod had Peter taken into custody and put in prison under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. He intended to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter, thus was being kept in prison, but prayer by the church was fervently being made to God on his behalf.

On the very night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter, secured by double chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while outside the door guards kept watch on the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood by him and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and awakened him, saying, "Get up quickly." The chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, "Put on your belt and your sandals." Peter did so.

Then the angel said, "Put on your cloak and follow me." So Peter followed the angel out, not

realizing that what was happening through the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first guard, then the second, and came to the iron gate leading out to the city, which opened for them by itself. They emerged and made their way down an alley, and suddenly the angel left him.

Acts 12.1-11

- When has an angel helped you out of a bad spot?
- When have you experienced the prayer of a community support you?

## PRAY

**LEADER:** Who do we say the Son of Man is?

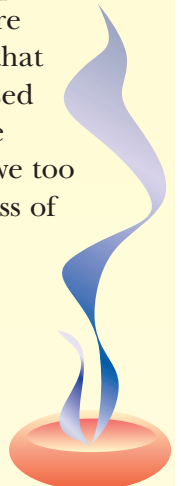
**ALL:** We say Jesus is the Son of the living God as Peter did.

**LEADER:** And that baptized into his death we were buried with him, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

**ALL:** We are.

**LEADER:** Who can separate us from the love of Christ?

**ALL:** We will keep faith with Jesus the Christ.



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