Homily for 5th Sunday of Easter 2016  
April 24, 2016  
Place:       St. Peter’s & Stella Niagara  
Theme:      Admire St. Paul’s proclamation of the Good News  
Mood:       Joyful and instructional

Last week, we began reading in the Acts of the Apostles about St. Paul. We will continue to do so until Pentecost Sunday. Various historians rank St. Paul as one of the 35 most important and influential people of history. After Jesus founded Christianity, Paul propagated the religion from being a small Jewish sect at Jerusalem to a Jewish and mostly Gentile religion which expanded during his lifetime from Syria to Rome and perhaps Spain.

Scholars attribute to Paul or his disciples 13 letters in the New Testament. This combined Pauline corpus is twice as long as the longest gospel, and twice as long as all the other New Testament letters. Considering that the second half of the Acts of the Apostles focuses on Paul and his ministry, it is fair to say that about 1/3 of the New Testament was written either by or about Paul.

I want to make one point: St. Paul proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ wherever he went, and he went where the action was! He came from the city of Tarsus, now located in Turkey. Tarsus served as a commercial hub on the trade routes between Asia and Europe. Tarsus served also as an intellectual center, which surpassed Athens and Alexandria whose heydays by that time had come and gone by some hundreds of years. Coming from multicultural and multilingual Tarsus, Paul welcomed encounters with peoples in the largest and most diverse cities: Rome with its million people, Antioch and Ephesus with their half million and quarter million people respectively. Paul wrote and spoke cultural Greek and Scriptural Hebrew. He loved to engage in conversation with all kinds of people: leaders like kings, governors, Jewish priests, and intellectual leaders, and the common people. He never backed down from a confrontation. This morning’s reading refers to the cities of Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. When Paul first visited those places, his strict Jewish opponents harassed him, beat him up and chased him out of town. Paul went to nearby Derbe to recover from his injuries. Once he regained his strength, he returned right to the same places and finished his speeches! He loved to debate, but others perceived him as a trouble-maker. For this, authorities arrested him at least six times. Except for the last time which resulted in his martyrdom, Paul either had talked his way out of trouble, or had escaped from jail by divine assistance. One author famously identifies Paul as “the Lion of God.” All that he did, Paul did in honor of Jesus Christ, whose name Paul mentions over 700 times, or on average, about fifty times in each letter.

Paul, a very faithful and highly educated Jew, had been a persecutor of Christians. On his way to Damascus, however, the Lord Jesus literally knocked Paul off his high horse. The risen Lord asked Paul, “Why do you persecute me?” Immediately after that event, Paul prayed in a
remote place for three years. The vision of the risen Lord had changed Paul’s life. For the next 15 years, Paul focused his life on preaching and teaching about Jesus and Jesus' church. All 13 of his letters Paul begins with these or similar words: “Paul, by the grace of God, an apostle and servant of Jesus Christ, set apart to proclaim the gospel of God.” (cf. Rom. 1.1.). All 13 letters, Paul ends with these or similar words: “the grace of our lord Jesus Christ be with you. May my love remain with all of you in Christ Jesus.” (cf. 1 Cor. 16:29)

I hope that this teaching about St. Paul might inspire you. Personally, I love and admire St. Paul, and attribute my vocation to priesthood, in part, to reading his writings. In closing, may I read you a section typical of Philippians:

I beg you to make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideals. Never act out of rivalry or conceit; rather let all the parties think humbly of others as superior to themselves, each of you looking to others’ interests rather than to one’s own. Your attitude must be that of Jesus Christ. Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God as something to be grasped at. Rather he emptied himself and took the form of a slave being born in the likeness of men. ... He humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! (Phil. 2.1c-11)