

SS Peter & Paul

30<sup>th</sup> June 2024

'On this Rock ... Unity with Rome'

Acts 12: Peter saved from prison by the Lord

2Tim 4: *the crown of righteousness ... to all those who have longed for me*

Mt 16: 13–19: *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*

A blessed feastday to you all! The feast of SS Peter & Paul is officially 29<sup>th</sup> June (Saturday), but is transferred this year to the Sunday: another lovely feast of our rich Catholic calendar. I suppose that SS Peter & Paul dominate much of what we think of as we contemplate the Gospel message of Jesus that they helped deliver to us: Peter, ever-present in the Gospels from the beginning at the fishing vessels on Lake Galilee; Paul brought into the picture early after Pentecost and receiving that astonishing experience of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus; Peter, always the spokesman for the Twelve, and appointed by the Lord Himself to be the anchor and rock that holds the Church in unity; Paul whose eloquence, in preaching and writing, won over so many new converts from Jewish & non-Jewish backgrounds, and who left us such a treasure of teaching in his letters in the NT. This feast is not only a chance to honour the 2 greatest Apostles of the early

Church, but also draws our mind towards *Rome* where their deaths as martyrs occurred: in particular, we look towards Rome on this day as an all-important chance for prayer for *our Holy Father the Pope*. The Gospel for this feast is the passage from Mt16 when Our Lord chooses Simon from amongst the Apostles to have a key role: “*You are Peter, and on this ‘Rock’ I will build My Church.*” Naturally, therefore, this great summer feast of the Apostles is an ideal moment to pray for the *unity* of the Church, anchored in the very person of the Pope, successor of St Peter.

One of the most poignant images of the papacy, ever, for me, occurred near the start of the coronavirus pandemic: it was the sight of Pope Francis on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020 delivering an evening meditation and *Urbi et Orbi* blessing *alone* in dark, rainy, windswept St Peter’s Square. It was at the height of the early pandemic in Italy, the worst weeks for that country’s experience of the virus, a moment for the greatest exercise of trust in the Almighty and prayer from the suffering world, which the Pope’s solitary and sombre figure that evening expressed. Here

was the Vicar of Christ, reaching out to the world with the Gospel in a way that no-one else could. Not specifically because he is Pope *Francis*, but because he is Pope.

When Our Lord Jesus chose 1 of the 12 Apostles to have a pre-eminent role, it was because He knew it was right: that there should be a *leader* amongst the Apostles, one to whom they would adhere, a *Rock* to whom they could anchor in all eventualities, throughout history, so as to be ‘Catholic,’ ‘universal,’ a visible sign of unity. One of the elements of the Pope’s annual celebration of SS Peter & Paul is the Mass with the past year’s new Archbishops from across the world: they receive from the Pope the ancient insignia of their being an Archbishop, a white-wool *pallium*, which they wear over their vestments at Mass. Their reason for travelling to Rome for this, and the reason for its always being on the feast of SS Peter & Paul, is that it emphasizes the *unity* of the whole Church: Peter & Paul with each other, in this city where they met their ends as martyrs; the world’s Archbishops with the Pope, bishop of the See of Peter; the world’s 1.3bn Catholics in unity via

their bishops with the Holy Father. As the Church, we look towards Rome not just nostalgically as a fine and historic city, but because of its deep continuity with the faith of the Apostles. We are, as we say every Sunday in the Creed, “*one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.*” That means that what we live and profess is, and must always be, that very same faith that SS Peter & Paul, along with the other Apostles and collaborators, taught in the very beginning, as they had received it from Christ. It’s no wonder that both Peter & Paul independently — after some 30yrs separately carrying out huge amounts of missionary work across the near- and middle-east, Mediterranean islands, and the south-eastern parts of Europe — ended up in Rome. It was the centre of the greatest empire of its day, and God’s providence drew them both there towards the end of their ministries, in the 60s of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD. In due course, though in different years (64/67AD), under the erratic emperor Nero, they each were martyred for being the Christian leaders: Peter crucified, upside down, apparently, near where the Vatican City is today; and Paul,

beheaded, on the outskirts of modern-day Rome on the road to Ostia. They gave this supreme witness to the Lord Jesus, whose crucifixion and resurrection some 30yrs previously, had changed the world, and redefined human history. But it also made of Rome a city unique in Christian history, its greatest two teachers, Peter & Paul, united in shedding their blood there. This is why our Holy Father — successor of St Peter as Head of the Church on earth — resides there in the Vatican City, as close to Peter's crucifixion and burial site as possible. It's why many Christians go on pilgrimage to Rome; and why our bishops are required to go there 5-yearly, to pray *ad limina apostolorum*. And it's why the world's new Archbishops are there this weekend, receiving the sign of the *pallium* that each is in communion of faith with Pope Francis.

Honouring them jointly today reminds us that the Church is all about *unity*, bringing *together*. There can be much legitimate diversity in the Catholic faith, whilst still we profess one and the same Lord, in conformity with His firm teachings. Jesus came to unite the whole of mankind

into one Kingdom, one Church, and to provide that unique path of salvation for us. Peter & Paul were *so different* in temperaments and backgrounds, but Our Lord used each of them to start sowing His saving message in those early years. We look to them, in their single-minded determination to live out, daily, and despite the hardships, the mission given to them by the Son of God. As we honour them, we pray for *unity and peace in the Church*; for the drive in every century including our own to preach the Gospel without fear, for the salvation of humanity; and we pray that SS Peter & Paul may remind us to value our faith above *all* things, to the very ending of our days.

We also invoke the prayers of the holy apostles Peter & Paul for Pope Francis himself; for those who work for the Church's worldwide mission in the Vatican; for bishops and priests the world over; that each and every one of them, striving for unity in the preaching of the Gospel, may have the faith and fervour of those pillars of the apostolic Church. Let's never forget that St Peter and Paul weren't perfect — think of St Peter's fearfulness and denial

even of *knowing* Jesus at the time of His Passion; think of St Paul, spending his time and energy trying to *eliminate* Christianity at its first beginnings. Yes, they each had to learn that they needed Our Lord's *forgiveness and grace* in order to fulfil His plan for them, their life's great work. They were great Apostles, ... but they were ordinary men chosen by God for this great task of evangelizing the near east and parts of Europe. They could only have done it because Jesus gave them His Holy Spirit; they didn't do it by their own efforts or human skills. They did it, too, by the life-changing experience they had had of the Risen Jesus: St Peter ran to the tomb, finding it empty of Jesus's body, and then saw Him, risen, with the others, on Easter Sunday evening; St Paul, in a singular and awesome privilege, encountered Jesus in an apparition unlike any other on that famous 'road to Damascus.' It was *Jesus* who converted their lives from that of 'ordinary men' to extraordinary Apostles, missionaries, and evangelists. That's what they have to share with us, as we honour them today: the irreplaceable value of the *deepest personal*

*encounter* with the Lord Jesus. Because, when we honour them, jointly, today, as the two great pillars of the early Church, we honour *Jesus Christ* even more. As one of the prefaces for martyrs says, addressing God: *For **You** are glorified when Your saints are praised; their very sufferings are but wonders of **Your** might ... and in their struggle, the victory is **Yours**.* We do not honour our great Apostles for their own merits, but as men who knew that to rely on the Lord Jesus for the strength and solution to life was the only way ... not "a" way, but "*the*" way, the *only* way. St Peter's profession of faith, right back at Caesarea Philippi gets to the heart of it: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* St Paul, eventually, came to appreciate that, too, and they both lived the reality of that, to their dying day. Via jailings and stonings and shipwrecks and all sorts of other sufferings, they won through to sainthood. This ultimate victory is what we want and need, and we *implore* their prayers to help us to get through life: our faith intact, holiness undinted, unity worked at, totally reliant on Jesus and His Spirit to bring us safely to heaven.