

THE FEAST OF SAINTS PETER & PAUL

Acts 12: 1 – 11

2 Timothy 4: 6 – 8, 17 – 18

Matthew 16: 13 – 19

Every five years each Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church has to make an *ad limina Apostolorum* visit to Rome.

They have a one-to-one conversation with the Pope – the Bishop of Rome – about their Diocese, and anything else that they might wish to discuss.

It's called an *ad limina Apostolorum visit* because that Latin phrase describes the first thing they do when they arrive in Rome: they go to the thresholds of the Apostles.

They go on pilgrimage to pray at the final resting places of the mortal remains of Peter and Paul. Laid there to rest in the peace of Christ after their martyrdom, on the orders of the Emperor Nero, this day in the year 67AD.

They were taken from the vile Mamertine Prison overlooking the Forum, and put to death – like the Lord they loved – outside the city walls.

Peter was taken to the west, and crucified upside down in the Circus Vaticanus, and hastily buried in the cemetery that was just outside the Circus.

His bones now lay in the spot where he was buried, and directly below where the Papal High Altar in St Peter's is positioned

Paul was taken to the east and, as he was a Roman citizen, was allowed a rather more 'dignified' death than Peter by being beheaded by a sword at a place now called Tre Fontane.

A Christian woman called Lucina buried Paul in the vineyard on her estate; and now that place is directly below the Papal High Altar in the Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls.

Both of them, in their earlier life, no doubt hoped they'd end their lives at a ripe old age surrounded by their families.

Peter, as a successful fisherman, until Jesus came along, and said to him: "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" Mt. 4: 19

Paul, probably hoping to become a high-flying Rabbi in Jerusalem; until the Risen Jesus came along on the Damascus Road.

He was zealously on a mission for the Jewish religious leaders to bring those who followed Jesus: "Back to Jerusalem in chains." Acts 9: 2

But the Lord had other plans for Paul; and this Jesus whom Paul had been persecuting so ferociously, became Paul's Lord and God.

Both Peter and Paul had their lives turned upside-down, inside-out, and would never be the same again.

As they faced death, nevertheless, they both knew with utter certainty that: "Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him." Phil. 3: 8 – 9

I have no idea how, or when, my life will end, or what the remainder of it holds for me.

Looking back on my life to when I left school at 16, I certainly had no idea that I would become a Roman Catholic Christian, and called by the Lord to be Ordained to the Ministry of Deacon.

I assumed that I'd spend my working life at the Bodleian Library; and I certainly had no thought for God, and what He might have in store for me.

Then, a couple of years later, Jesus entered my life: on a particular day, time, and place – ironically, the Bodleian – and I knew for sure that He was calling me into His Church.

And what that call did was to radically widen my horizons – eternally.

We honour Peter and Paul today because of their response to the call of Jesus; and they're very attractive models for us because neither of them were perfect.

Neither am I... so they give me hope.

But let's look now at what they mean, and this Feast in particular, for the Church we belong to. We're Roman Catholic Christians.

Roman; because Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as: "The Christ, the Son of the living God."

Mt. 16: 16 found its supreme expression in Peter laying down his life for Jesus in Rome.

Catholic; because of Paul's burning desire to take the Gospel of Christ to the entire world: his was a 'catholic' – 'universal' – mission.

Both of them were Servants of the Lord and, to use an age-old title for the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, 'Servant of the servants of God.'

For some people, being 'Roman' is the most important thing: for others being 'Catholic.'

But if we don't keep those two things together in harmony, I would suggest we cease to be faithful Roman Catholic Christians.

We become factional and, sometimes, uncharitable, pseudo-Christians

Today's Feast, where we celebrate the two pillars of the Church, Peter and Paul, should really show us how important it is to be Roman, and Catholic Christians.

Think of it rather like a wheel on Fr Paul's bike!

A wheel needs both a hub and spokes. Remove one, the wheel falls apart, and the bike and Fr Paul end up in a heap!

Both the hub – Rome – and the spokes – the catholic, the universal Church – need one another.

We can't have one without the other: we need Peter, and we also need Paul.

That then brings us on to the question of what the Church should be like; what is her Lord calling His Church to be?

We're not called to be a national Church, not even a white European Church; we're universal, we're Catholic.

We're not to be a Church that just attracts people like us: she is, like a Mother, to open her arms to anyone, and everyone.

And Jesus calls His Church to fill the world, where every place on earth is a place that the Church can call home.

These words are engraved on the Statue of Liberty in New York: "Give me your tired, your poor, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me."

Words that should be engraved on the heart of the Church, so that she becomes the place everyone can call home; because the Church is the only body given the mission, and the capacity, to be the vivid sign of God's universal salvation.

The Church is to be in the world, but not of the world, and yet the temptation to worldliness seems to be a temptation particular to Christians.

To be willing to follow Jesus up to a point, but no further.

This is not the path Peter and Paul trod; they knew that you can't remove the Cross from the path of Jesus, it's always there.

Our following of Jesus must not be worn like a gloss, a veneer of pseudo-Christianity.

To hear the voice of Jesus calling us to follow Him is not like a veneer: the call of Jesus goes straight to the bones, heart: goes deep within, and changes us.

Let's ask for the grace to follow Jesus in this way, knowing that He never leaves us alone: He is always with us, even to the end of time.

He is always, too, with His Church; for He promised us, through Peter, that: "All the powers of hell will not conquer it." Mt. 16: 18

So let's: "Have the courage, to walk in the Lord's presence, with the cross of the Lord; to build the Church upon the blood of the Lord, which was poured out on the cross; and to confess the only glory there is: Christ crucified. And in this way the Church will go forward.

[Let us pray that the] Holy Spirit, through the intercession of the [Apostles, Peter and Paul], will grant us this grace: to walk, to build, to profess Jesus Christ crucified. Amen."

Pope Francis: Homily during the Mass with Cardinal-electors March 14 2013