

A Homily for the Solemnity of Saints Peter & Paul, 28th June 2020
from Fr Allan

Above the catacombs of Saint Sebastian in Rome is a room where the Christian community would gather after the burial of someone (a member of the community) who had died. The catacombs are early Christian burial chambers. (There are also Jewish catacombs in Rome) Saint Sebastian's are the earliest designated cemeteries. It is from here that all other catacombs take their name. If you take a tour of the catacombs, even today, you will be led through a chapel, along corridors, past graves and on to an "upper room". It is thought that Christians used this site on the Appian Way from the 2nd Century. On the walls of the "upper room" are inscriptions, a bit like ancient graffiti, that say things like "Peter and Paul pray for us", "Peter and Paul lead us to heaven", "Peter and Paul come to our aid".

Saint Peter and Saint Paul are the two most important saints in the Christian Church. They are pillars upon which the Church of Jesus Christ was founded. If Jesus is the cornerstone then Peter and Paul are the pillars. It is our belief and our tradition that they both ended their lives in Rome. As the graffiti in the upper room suggests the Church has venerated them together from the very beginning. They are together in liturgy and in the Church's painting and art.

Of course, they weren't always "together". They came from very different backgrounds and were very different personalities. There are reports that they had disagreements. They didn't always see eye to eye. However, their acknowledgement that Jesus was Lord, was unequivocal.

We know that St Peter was something of a "rough diamond". He was a fisherman. Perhaps you could say he was a man of the people. We don't know much about his education but we know that he was married. One of Jesus' healings was of Peter's mother in law. As a fisherman he must have been something of a businessman. He would have had to sell his fish to people as far away as Jerusalem. We might have thought that the apostles were poor, but this is not necessarily true of Peter. He was hardworking and survived.

We probably remember him as the one who quite often misunderstood Jesus. He took Jesus' words literally and missed the point. We know him as the one who famously denied that he knew Jesus and then bitterly regretted it. In spite of all this he was the acknowledged leader of the "Twelve". He was one of Jesus' inner circle who was with him on all of the key moments of the Gospel - the transfiguration, the agony in the garden, the miracles, the healings - in fact every occasion. In spite of misunderstanding and denial Jesus trusted him. When he asked the disciples "Who do you say I am?" I think he was already assured that Peter would give him the answer he required. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". Knowing that the Church was in safe hands Jesus could continue his journey to Jerusalem - to passion, crucifixion and resurrection, to the culmination of the work of his Father. In spite of all the odds it was Peter not Paul who would become the leader of the Church.

Paul might have seemed a more obvious choice. Paul came from Tarsus - a Jew from the dispersed Jewish community (the Diaspora). He actually went to Jerusalem in order to study under one of the most revered teachers of Jewish Law, Gamaliel the Elder who was an authority in the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee. Even at this stage Paul was ardent and zealous. It would be a natural progression for him to persecute anyone who spoke out against all these things that he held so dear. We know that he did this with a vengeance. We also know that he

had an incredible conversion experience. He believed that he was especially chosen to preach Jesus Christ. He never denied his past but by the end of his life he could utter those immortal words, "I have run the race to the finish... all there is to come now is the crown of righteousness reserved for me". One of my teachers said that St Paul knew the mind of Jesus Christ better than anyone.

In their very different ways both St Peter and St Paul were able to answer the question "Who do you say I am?" They both had a very personal relationship with the Lord. Today's solemnity asks us to answer that question as well. We know information about Jesus Christ, but who is Jesus for us? I remember way back in the 1970s one of the professors in a theology department in a British University said that he was an atheist. As students we had long discussions as to whether it was possible for someone who had immersed himself in matters of God for so long, to be an atheist.

St Peter and St Paul are a great reminder to us that our Church is very diverse but is a unity. The Church is one because God is one. St Peter is the Rock. He is the solid foundation. He represents the Authority, the Apostolic Nature and Beginning, the Structure and Foundation. St Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles. He imbues the Church with its charism, He is the evangeliser to the ends of the world. He takes the Good News beyond its small and local beginning. He takes it to the future. If the Church is going to continue the work of Jesus it needs both Peter and Paul. A Happy Feast day everyone!