

Saints Peter & Paul

On this day we honour the memory of two people, our first pope and our first preacher. Both sinners who became great saints. For every saint was a sinner and every sinner can be a saint. Peter denied the Lord thrice and Paul sought to kill and punish his followers, starting with St Stephen, the protomartyr of the Church. One knew the Lord, the other was known for the Lord. One had spent physical time, indeed years, with Christ, the other dwelt in the mystical presence of Christ. Both died in Rome around the year 64 – Peter by crucifixion – whose hands were bound and he died on a cross, though upside down, and Paul who was beheaded – being a Roman citizen, he could not be crucified. One bears the keys of the kingdom, as does every pope, the other the two edged sword of truth, that pierces every heart. Both witnessed to Christ in their lives and by their deaths. And today their tombs in Rome are truly validated and venerated with Basilicas in their honour.

Let's us recall their past. Simon who was a fisherman was chosen by God to become the fisher of men and head of the Church, when he said: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ said to him, And I say to you that you are Cephas or rock (in English Peter), and upon this rock I will build my Church." With this profession of faith, he received a new office, primate of the Apostolic band and grace would lead him up a rocky path. The ups and downs of following the Lord. At one moment he walks on water – but then he takes his eyes off Christ and sinks. He makes the first profession of faith – but then the Lord rebukes him as Satan. He refuses to be washed, and then, demands to be washed all over. He fails to pray as he ought and then as a worthless soldier, cuts off Malchus' ear. He promises to be faithful, but denies the Lord three times, fleeing out of fear. Simon Peter is like all of us – he is an ordinary man who tries his natural utmost to do what is supernatural. Only in time would he realize that it would be divine grace that gives courage to the coward, grace that inspires wisdom to the foolish, grace that provides patience and perseverance.

While the Holy Spirit was forming Simon Peter after Pentecost in Jerusalem, that same divine power would soon transform a zealous man called Saul into the evangelical preacher known as Paul. The charismatic change in his heart and mind, from within, is a constant reminder to all of us that there are no limits to God's divine power. There are no hopeless cases. If God can change in an instant on the way to Damascus, the persecuting Saul who hated Christianity then everyone and anyone on their way is able to be converted. And what a dramatic change it was! For Paul's influence in establishing the Church through the world seemed to have no limits. Did he not preach more than any other? Did he not establish more churches than any other? Did he not write more books in the New Testament than any other? When people met him they met Jesus, when they heard him, they heard Jesus. God's Word was imbued in his flesh, heart and mind. Yet all is grace, we are temples or vessels filled with his grace. He said: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:7-11).

So today there is one day for the passion and death of two apostles. Peter went first, Paul followed. We are celebrating a victorious day, a glorious red day, consecrated by the blood of the apostles, victorious for us, also, for where they have gone, we in this Jubilee Year, hope to follow.