

Homily for The Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul 2009

There is something inescapably Roman about this feast. The apparently strange combination of saints, the two giants of the apostolic Church who did not always see eye to eye is largely brought about by the fact that both were put to death in Rome. They both began from the same point: it was their faith in Jesus Christ that motivated and drove them, but each went his own way, St. Paul travelling far and wide to found new communities of Christians and to preach the gospel, while St. Peter stayed closer to Jerusalem strengthening, encouraging and uniting the brothers. Having started at the same place, then gone their separate ways, they are brought back together once more when each is brought to Rome, and each is killed there in the persecutions commanded by Nero in the 60s. This Roman flavour to the feast is continued to this day, because this is the feast on which new archbishops are called to Rome, and this is the feast on which Catholics throughout the world collect money to support the Pope's charitable causes.

Peter and Paul were brought to Rome, two ordinary men brought to the mighty city at the heart of a great empire. Although we know there was already a christian community here before they came, because St. Paul wrote one of his most important letters to the Roman christians, when these two men came to Rome christianity was tiny, insignificant. But the blood of these two men and the other Roman martyrs begins to change the city. Its centre of gravity shifts so that it ceases to be the centre of a powerful empire, and becomes instead the centre of a universal faith, and in this the mighty Rome becomes an even greater place. To this day a visit to Rome brings you face to face with Christ on every street. Rome is the city of Peter and Paul, and Peter and Paul are the premier saints of Rome.

Rome, of course, is always flooded with tourists and visitors, and amongst them there are always dozens of bishops, priests, religious and seminarians. But at this time of year there is always a particular gathering, because each year on the Feast of SS Peter and Paul, the Pope summons all the new archbishops (including archbishops who have moved to a new diocese, so Archbishop Nichols will be there) to be given the pallium. I thought it might

Fr Peter Newsam - Petworth - West Sussex

be interesting to examine what this means, because it tells us something about our catholic faith.

The pallium is a strip of wool that is worn by the Pope and by metropolitan archbishops over the top of their mass vestments. It is a sign that those archbishops share in a special way in the Pope's responsibilities as a shepherd. This is what the Pope said when he received the pallium at his inauguration:

"What the Pallium indicates first and foremost is that we are all carried by Christ. But at the same time it invites us to carry one another."

The woollen pallium is symbolic of the sheep that is carried safely home on the shoulders of the good shepherd, and it reminds the Pope and the pastors that share his care for the people that they are to work alongside Christ the good shepherd. On another occasion the Pope said:

[The pallium] becomes the symbol of the calling to love men as[Christ] does, together with him: those who are searching, those who have questions, those who are self-assured and the humble, the simple and the great; it becomes the symbol of the calling to love all of them with the strength of Christ and in view of Christ, so that they may find him, and in him, find themselves.

So, the job for the shepherds of the Church, and by extension therefore the job of all christians, is 'to love all people with the strength of Christ ..., so that they may find him and in him find themselves.' The Pope summons the new archbishops to Rome because he is a shepherd, and he gives them a gift to remind them that it is in the essence of their role to be shepherds too, seeking out and rescuing those who are lost, and there are plenty of people in our world who are lost, lost in sin, lost in confusion, lost in sickness, lost in despair, or simply unable to find what it is that gives meaning to life.

It would be quite possible for the Pope to send the pallium out to each new archbishop, and in the past this has been done. But there is something very symbolic about the journey

Fr Peter Newsam - Petworth - West Sussex

to Rome to collect it. The new pallia are blessed on the vigil of the feast, and they are stored by the tomb of St. Peter until the morning when they are handed out. One of the American archbishops is writing a blog about his pilgrimage to Rome to collect the pallium, and it picks up the growing excitement of his family, his friends, representatives of his diocese who are going with him; they are all travelling to Rome to be close to Peter, and in being close to Peter they will be close to Christ. For two thousand years pilgrims have travelled to Rome to be close to the apostles, and to be close to the Lord. In a sense, as the pilgrims have converged on Rome from the furthest regions of the world, one could say the whole world has come to Rome. It is good for us to think of ourselves as Roman; it is good to be a Roman Catholic. This is nothing to do with being foreign, or somehow disloyal to our own country and culture. To be a Roman Catholic simply means that we choose to stand alongside the faith of the apostles. We do not want a local religion, something suited just to our own country; we do not want a religion specifically tailored for our language, or even for our own moment in history; we want the faith of the apostles. To be Roman means to be independent of local fads and fashions, it is to be part of something universal, something which in its essentials is the same throughout the world and throughout history. The feast of SS. Peter and Paul is essentially a Roman feast, a feast centred on the city of their deaths, a feast centred on the successor of St. Peter. Because we are Roman we are not uniquely British, or French, or American. We are citizens of the universal church and brothers and sisters of all those throughout the world who look to Rome for their shepherd. This is a feast that emphasises the unimportance of race or nationality and stresses instead the unity that we find around Christ's chief shepherd, the Pope. Before I became a catholic I struggled a little with this feast. SS Peter and Paul were important saints, of course, but was that enough to lift this feast out of the ordinary? Only once I became a Roman Catholic did I really get it: Rome is universal; go to a general audience and you will see all the world comes to Rome. In a sense Rome is the world, and much as I rather dislike it as a city, every visit there is always a revelation of that unity and universality which St Peter and St Paul tried to promote, which Christ wanted and prayed for, and which the Church still longs to achieve.