Homily for the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul 2026 Year A

Today is the feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, two of the great figures of the Church, Peter, upon whom the Church was founded, and Paul it's great preacher and evangeliser.

Let us think today a little about Paul.

Paul was born in Tarsus, what today is a quiet Turkish country town, but in Paul's day, it was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, with palaces, marketplaces, fountains and bath houses.

Paul described himself as a Hebrew born of Hebrews. He was from an Orthodox Jewish family who resisted being assimilated into the Greek style of life. He enjoyed the privilege of Roman citizenship which he inherited from his father and grandfather. The family business was making tents, perhaps for the Roman army. He was not slow to exploit his rank of Roman citizenship, and perhaps he carried with him a certificate showing this for it certainly helped him to avoid scourging and imprisonment on several occasions, and at the end assured him his death by beheading, instead of the slow painful death by crucifixion, which St Peter had to undergo.

Paul was about 10 years younger than Jesus and never met Him in the flesh. As a young student Paul went up to Jerusalem to train at one of the Rabbinical schools, under the famous Rabbi, Gamaliel. It was Gamaliel who advised the Sanhedrin after Easter to leave the followers of Jesus alone. If the Christian movement were only human it would die out of its own accord he said. If it were from God then perhaps they would end up fighting against the Almighty.

But Saul, as Paul was known then, was far too zealous to allow the heretical sect of the Nazarenes to flourish and spread. He egged on and held the coats of the men who stoned to death the first martyr, St Stephen. He was on his way to Damascus with warrants signed by the high priest for the arrest of various Christians when he was struck by a bright light from Heaven and tossed from his horse to the ground. He heard the words," Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Blinded, he asked, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me", was the reply.

This powerful encounter with Jesus was the key to Paul's conversion. He was left blind for another 3 days until he was finally baptised by a reluctant Ananias, and his sight was restored. Such was his passion, that he began straight away to preach Jesus to the Jews in Damascus. He aroused such enmity that he had to be smuggled out of the city by his fellow Christians. He had a hard time being accepted by them; they deeply mistrusted him, remembering all the harm he had caused them. Paul, as he now called himself, was a zealot and perhaps he needed to cool his heels and learn to work in God's time and God's pace.

For the next 6 to 9 years Paul lived back in Tarsus, perhaps tent making and waiting upon the Lord's summons.

Was he frustrated by this apparent redundancy? Did he have any intimation of the great missionary journeys that were to follow? Many suppose that Paul's great missionary journeys followed immediately upon his conversion, but that is not the case. This extended novitiate was

perhaps a necessary time for prayer and reflection before finally Barnabas recruited him to help with his teachings in the Church in Antioch.

Paul's title is that of the Apostle to the Gentiles for he was to preach the word of God to all human beings, not just to the Jews. And what hard times and adventures lay ahead. It is all there in the sublime writings of his letters. He was the first great theologian of the Church, not just telling people about this character called Jesus and what He had said but stretching and teasing out the meanings of those words and how they could be applied to everyday human life. He went to Cyprus, and then to Asia minor, then back to Greece, to Athens, Corinth and finally back to Ephesus. Sometimes he was starving. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, flogged, and dragged in chains to Rome where he was under house arrest for two years. More journeys followed, possibly as far west as Spain, and then at some point he was arrested on Nero's orders and dragged back to Rome, to the dark, dank, underground Mamertine prison, which you can still visit in Rome today. He was executed about the same time as St Peter at Tre Fontane, South of Rome. His body was buried along the Via Ostiense, where a great church now stands in his name, St Pauls Outside The Walls.

You get the impression with St Paul that he could never do things by halves. He was obviously strong and healthy, and you sometimes feel he was driven by manic nervous energy. He was highly educated, yet with a poetic soul, and a gift for writing. He converted thousands to be followers of Christ. He didn't mince words. He claimed to be at least on a par with the 12 apostles who knew Christ. He himself was called by Christ and sent by Him. As that is what an Apostle was, so he opens his letters describing himself as Paul, 'an Apostle sent by the Lord Jesus'. He needed an authority that none could question. With Paul it was all or nothing. He literally wore himself out in the work of the Lord. This is just part of the man that we are remembering and honouring today.

What is it that we can learn from him? Perhaps this, that when, like him, our eyes and ears are opened to the voice of God we know in our heart and conscience that there is no turning back.

Just like him, if we follow Christ, it will cost us, and we should be prepared to not only count the cost, but to witness to Christ and His values with courage and zeal.

Paul must have loved Christ deeply. It is there in all of his letters. It is his motivating force when he writes about love to the Church in Rome. He says that love is always ready to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes, but love itself does not come to an end.

In the evening of his life, when he was worn out by his labours, he wrote to Timothy, "As for me, my life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight to the end, I have run the race to the finish. I have kept the faith, and all there is to come now is the crown of righteousness reserved for me, which the Lord the Righteous Judge will give to me on that day, and not only to me but all those who have longed for His appearing".

If, like Paul, we can live our lives by Christ's calling, then that same glory will be ours.