

'Unity with Rome'

Acts 12: Peter saved from prison by the Lord

2Tim 4: *the crown of righteousness ... to all those who have longed for me*

Mt 16: 13–19: *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*

This weekend, one of our auxiliary bishops in Westminster — Bishop John Wilson, who covers the west-London deaneries of the diocese on behalf of the Cardinal — is in Rome, at the Pope's celebrations of SS Peter & Paul feastday. That's because he's recently been chosen to be the new Archbishop of Southwark (S. London & Kent), and new Archbishops always receive from the Pope on this feastday the ancient insignia of their being an Archbishop: the white-wool *pallium*, which they wear over their vestments at Mass.

The reason for travelling to Rome for this, and the reason for its always being on the feast of SS Peter & Paul, is that it emphasizes the unity of the whole church: Peter & Paul with each other, in this city where they met their ends as martyrs; the world's Archbishops with the Pope, bishop of the See of Peter; the world's 1.3bn Catholics in unity via their bishops with the Holy Father. As the Church, we look towards Rome not just nostalgically as such a fine and historic city, but precisely because of its deep connections

with the faith of the Apostles. We are, as we say every Sunday in the Creed, "one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church." That means that what we live and profess is and must always be, that very same faith that SS Peter & Paul, along with the other apostles and collaborators taught in the very beginning, as they had received it from Christ. It was no wonder that both Peter & Paul, independently, and after some 30yrs separately carrying out huge amounts of missionary work across the near- and middle-east, Mediterranean lands, and the south-eastern parts of Europe, ended up in Rome. It was the centre of the greatest empire of its day, and God's providence drew them both there towards the end of their ministries, in the 60s of the 1st c. AD. In due course, though in different years, under the erratic emperor Nero, they each were martyred for being the Christian leaders: Peter crucified, upside down, apparently, near where the Vatican City is today; and Paul, beheaded, on the outskirts of modern-day Rome on the road to Ostia. They gave this supreme witness to the Lord Jesus, whose crucifixion and resurrection some 30yrs previously, had

changed the world, and redefined human history. But it also made of Rome a city unique in Christian history, its greatest two teachers, Peter & Paul, united in shedding their blood there. This is why our Holy Father — successor of St Peter as Head of the Church on earth — resides there, as close to the site of Peter's crucifixion and burial as possible. It's why many Christians go on pilgrimage to Rome; and why our bishops are required to go there 5-yearly, to pray at the tombs of the apostles Peter & Paul. It's why Bishop John is there, today, receiving the sign of the *pallium* that he is in communion of faith with Pope Francis.

St Peter and St Paul dominate so much of what we think of as we contemplate the Gospel message of Jesus that they helped deliver to us. Peter, ever-present in the Gospels from the beginning at the fishing vessels on Lake Galilee; Paul brought into the picture early after Pentecost and receiving that astonishing experience of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Peter, always the spokesman for the Twelve, and appointed by the Lord Himself to be the anchor and rock that holds the Church in unity; Paul whose

eloquence, in preaching and writing, won over so many new converts from Jewish & non-Jewish backgrounds, and who left us such a treasure of teaching in his letters in the NT.

Honouring them jointly today reminds us that the Church is all about *unity*, bringing *together*. There can be much legitimate diversity in the Catholic faith, whilst still we profess one and the same Lord, in conformity with His firm teachings. Jesus came to unite the whole of mankind into one Kingdom, one Church, and to provide that unique path of salvation for us. Peter & Paul were so different in temperaments and backgrounds, but the Lord used each of them to start sowing His saving message in those early years. We look to them, in their single-minded determination to live out, daily, and despite the hardships, the mission given to them by the Son of God. As we honour them, we pray for unity and peace for the Church; for the drive in every century including our own to preach the Gospel without fear, for the salvation of humanity; and we pray that SS Peter & Paul may remind us to value our faith above *all* things, to the very ending of our days.