

Saints Peter and Paul

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Where do we start with today's celebrated saints? Paul with his amazing letters, passionate and profound that seem to plumb the depths of the Christian mystery. He discovered the love of Jesus and so travelled around the Mediterranean with fire in his belly. "The Son of Man loved me and gave himself for me he would cry. Or Peter, faithful and faithless, headstrong and bumbling, a man who speaks before he thinks, a man who loves his Lord but knows himself to be failure.

Let me talk about two visions.

The first we know well. Saul who did not know Jesus in his earthly ministry met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. His life was turned upside down. From that moment on, he became Paul, the ardent missionary who travelled far and wide to proclaim the gospel.

Paul's journey illustrates the transformative power of God's grace. He went from being an enemy of Christ to one of His most passionate advocates. His story reminds us that no one is beyond the reach of God's love and that every sinner has the potential to become a saint.

There is another vision I would like to mention - one to Peter. It is not in the Gospel but rings true.

At the Last Supper, when Jesus had surprised Peter by washing his feet. Jesus spoke of his departure and Peter said: "**Lord, where are you going?**" [in Latin, *Quo Vadis, Domine*]. When the Lord said he couldn't follow him now, Peter replied: "*Why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.*" "*Lay down your life for me?*" answered Jesus. "*I tell you most solemnly, before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times.*" We know the rest of the story.

There is a church in Rome with that name - *Domine Quo Vadis* on the Appian Way, that great road that led south of Rome. And there is a story that comes from a 2nd Century Apocryphal document called *The Acts of Peter*. It tells of Peter walking along, having just escaped being crucified in the city.

Behind him smoke is rising from Rome where Christians are being crucified and burned alive by Nero. Peter is not walking away out of fear or cowardice, but because he has been convinced by the Christians in the city that he is too important to the Christian movement to allow himself to be killed in Rome. He must get out and continue to lead the church elsewhere.

The novel *Quo Vadis* takes up the story of Peter, accompanied by his companion Nazarius seeing a bright vision approaching them as they walked. Peter's pilgrim's staff fell from the ground and he fell to his knees. - "O Christ! O Christ!" he cried. Then he asked his question: "*Quo vadis, Domine?*" Where are you going Lord. And the Lord said to him "If you desert my people, I am going to Rome to be crucified a second time." At that Peter turned to face the seven hills of the city, and his companion asked him, as if in an echo: "*Quo vadis, Domine?*" "To Rome" Peter said, and he returned.

St Peter, especially in St Mark's Gospel, is one who does not like the idea of suffering. It makes the *Quo Vadis* legend such a profound and true story. Peter walks away from suffering, walks away from the Cross, for whatever the noblest reasons.

But what if we took this story seriously and let it speak to us about Peter's, or the Church's mission in the world? What if we were defined as people who walked towards the suffering of the world, rather than away from it?

Maybe we would be people who, rather than asking where we should go, would continually ask the question, *Quo vadis, domine?* Where are you going, Lord? And we might then respond to Jesus by following him into the places he is going, where he wants to be. Maybe we would be people who recognize that the cross is not a loss, but a victory; that self-giving rather than self-preservation is the way of Christ; and that sometimes, being with people in their suffering is more important than being for them.

St Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles had understood the Cross, as he told the Galatians. *"As for me, the only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world."* He could declare to the Philippians: *"Not only that, but I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I took on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place with him."* Philippians 3:8,9

In laying down his life in Rome he joined St Peter, apostle to the Gentiles, who could express the giving away of his own life in the words we heard this morning: *"My life is being poured out as a libation. I have fought the good fight, I have run the race to the finish."* His death by the sword, nor far from the Appian way is marked today by a Church at Tre Fontane, and his tomb lies along the Via Ostiense in the Basilica that bears his name, just as the tomb of Peter is on the Vatican hill, now under the great dome of Michelangelo.

Peter and Paul, the pillars of the Church of Rome, stand as united witness to the Cross of Christ, and the power of the Resurrection. May their prayers help us this day.

May they help us this week when we will have in Britain a General Election. We will all vote according to our consciences. But it is important to vote, to be concerned for the common good. Politics is about our life together and we vote according to our values, that we constantly seek to align with Christ and his kingdom. May we do so wisely.