

THE EMMAUS SERIES

The Foundation of the Apostles

Acts 12:1-11

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18

Matthew 16:13-19

In Rome, spring is giving way to early summer, and the Church honours its great patrons. On Pentecost Day we celebrated the birth of the Church through the gift of the Spirit in the Paschal Mystery. That Church is built “upon the foundation of the Apostles” (Eph 2: 20) – the followers of the Lord must do the “planting” and “watering”, knowing that it is only “God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3: 6).

Jesus called together a group of twelve – the new Israel he was inaugurating would realise the destiny of the old Israel and its twelve tribes. The subsequent fate of many of the Twelve after they had given their testimony to the Paschal Mystery is lost in the mists of history. Peter and Paul, however, live on in our Catholic memory. Today’s readings call up for us this awareness of them as our constant companions in our journey of faith.

Peter, the bluff, hearty fisherman became the leader among the disciples, even during the life of Jesus. To him it was given by the Father to recognise and confess faith in Jesus as the one who would realise all the hopes of Israel. Failing tragically, he soon became the courageous leader and spokesman of the infant Church. Paul, the conscientious Pharisee and lover of the ways of old Israel, was also a man of passion. At first determined to destroy the Christian movement, he became, the fearless champion and interpreter of the faith, despite incredible hardships and betrayals.

They were so different. Their work in establishing the Church reminds us of the challenging ways of God, calling us all – though so different - to take up our responsibilities as disciples. The collaboration to which Peter and Paul were called was not without its difficulties and misunderstandings; their faith-filled response, however, made that collaboration a foundation that will be remembered until the end of time. So different in temperament and background, their discipleship led them to share a great deal: each underwent a humiliating conversion; each embraced the Saviour Cross - as their lives were “poured out as a libation (i.e. a precious liquid poured into the ground as a sacrifice)”; each of them was sustained by the certain hope that they would share in the power of the Lord’s resurrection. Both were to end their days as they gave their witness – in their teaching and the shedding of their blood - in Rome, the centre of their world.

The commission given to Peter in today’s gospel implies a great authority - “binding and loosing” was an effective authority in the life of Israel. Jesus’ words refer to the final “Kingdom”; the authority given to Peter concerns the “Church”, or “Assembly”, called together by God as a foreshadowing of the Kingdom. With the passing of time, as the steadfast faith of the Roman Church, nurtured by the Apostles, became a rallying point for the Church’s unity, this was seen as a fulfilment of the promise of Jesus to Peter. In 1995, in a remarkable gesture, Pope John Paul II – in the encyclical, *Ut unum sint* – called upon Christians of all traditions to assist the Holy See to understand how it should carry out its mission as the Church’s principle of unity. Let us pray today that this desire will be fulfilled.

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