13th Sunday in O.T. – The Feast of St Peter and St Paul 2025

I enjoy reading well-written, and reasonably accurate, historical novels. One of my favourite authors is Conn Iggulden, and I have just finished reading Book 2 of his trilogy “Nero”, “Nero, the Tyrant of Rome” – he who, it is said, fiddled while Rome burned! This same Nero has a strong connection with the feast we celebrate today. Nero was believed to be responsible for the great fire of Rome, in 64AD. Seeking a scapegoat, he blamed the Christians, and in the persecution that followed, St Peter was, according to tradition, crucified upside down. Sometime later, St Paul was also executed. Their martyrdom, and that of the many others at that time, was just another episode in the long catalogue of cruelties attributed to Nero.

Early, on Tuesday morning, our parish Youth Faith Group, together with others, fifty-three in all, leave for our pilgrimage to Rome. On our way into Rome, we will stop at the Basilica of St Paul, and there, venerate the Tomb of that great preacher of the Gospel. The next day we shall go to St Peter’s Basilica, and process to the Tomb of Peter, recalling his words, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life, and we believe” (Jn.6:68).* These two important events will focus, for us, the centrality, in our lives, of Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

On our visits to the Basilicas, we will pass through the Holy Doors. These doors are rich in symbolism – going through a doorway always brings us into another space. The Holy Doors symbolise Jesus himself – “through him, with him, in him", we enter into God’s space, into God’s love. Jesus said, *"I am the gate, the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." (John 10:9).*

Both Peter and Paul would have considered themselves to be religious men – they said their prayers, were observant of their religious duties, and remained within the tramrails of their religious traditions. But in Jesus, they discovered a doorway that took them into a new place, where their thinking, indeed their lives, were turned upside down!

These dramas began with a simple question to each of them; Peter was asked, *“Who do you say I am? (Mt.16:16; Mk.8:27; Lk.9:20);* Paul, on his way to Damascus to arrest the followers of Jesus, *“fell to the ground, and then heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ Who are you, Lord?’ he asked” (Acts 9:4).* These questions were the opening dramas in the lives of both Peter and Paul, within which, Jesus was always the central character, and with whom they became more and more enthralled. Paul spoke for both Peter and himself, when he declared, *“I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil.3:8).*

Peter, recognising the trust Jesus placed in him, often thought he understood Jesus, but discovered, again and again, that he did not. He had heeded the invitation of Jesus, *“Come, follow me”*, and in doing so discovered that he was invited into a relationship, which, like all relationships, had its ups-and-downs – growing in a relationship is always a learning situation. Sometimes Peter saw clearly, at other times he was confused and uncertain; sometimes his response to Jesus was sure, at others he completely misunderstood him.

Yet, extraordinarily, each incident drew him further into the life and love of Jesus, until that moment when Jesus drew him aside and asked, *“Simon, son of John, do you love me? Are you really my friend?”* Peter’s answer is his profession of faith in Jesus, *“Yes, Lord, you know everything; you know I love you” (Jn21:17)*. Jesus, in various ways, asks us the same questions, “*Do you love me? Are you really my friend?”*

The drama in Paul’s life was more complicated than that of Peter. Paul was a religious zealot – he was more Hebrew than the other Jews, more observant than the law-abiding, more pharisaic than the pharisees! He himself declared, *“as far as the Law can make you perfect, I was faultless” (Phil.3:4).* His commitment to his treasured way of life, and his zeal for the Law, was so exaggerated that it radically disturbed his relationship with God. We see this in regard to the martyrdom of Stephen, because we are told, *“Saul entirely approved of the killing”,* and afterwards *“went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison” (Acts8:1-3).*

However, his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, caused Paul to suddenly understand that it was his self-made concept of religion which was at the centre of his life, rather than that of the true God. His encounter not only gave him a new vision of things, but Jesus became the entire focus of his life. This former religious-zealot and violent man had come to realise, *“Without love, I am nothing at all” (1Cor.13:3).* Without Jesus nothing has value. When Jesus became the centre of Paul’s life, he realised, just as Peter did, that he was loved, and that he was trusted.

*“Lord,*

*may you be always at the centre of my life,*

*so that knowing you,*

*I may know myself, and that which I must do.”* **Amen.**