

The Solemnity of St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles - 28th June 2020 - St. Matthew 16 v 13 – 19

Last Sunday we witnessed a “turning-point” in the relationship between Jesus and His Disciples, when He “turned them around” and sent them out, as “Apostles” (those who are sent). From following Jesus they now also went out ahead of Him (St. Matthew 10 v 5f), to prepare the way of the Lord in all the towns and villages He was to visit. We saw that this “apostolate” now belongs to us all - and that the recently established Diocese of Menevia School of Evangelism and Catechetics is a school to assist us and encourage us in our apostolate.

This Sunday we witness the other “turning-point” in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples – at Caesarea Philippi. Simon Peter declares his faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Jewish longing and expectation, of Whom the prophets foretold that He will save His people, Israel. The Christ/Messiah will be a Deliverer, the Son of David, and just as in the past, God raised up Kings and Judges to deliver the people of Israel from their oppressors and conquerors, so under the occupation by the Greeks and then by the Romans, the Jewish people were eagerly awaiting the Coming of the Messiah who would finally and decisively deliver the nation.

But, following Simon Peter’s confession of faith, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus begins to challenge this popular understanding of the Messiah and, for the first time, begins to teach the twelve that His vocation as the Christ is to suffer and to die, and that through His Suffering and Death He will deliver not only the people of Israel but the whole world, not from political oppression (which may fall as a consequence) but deliverance from the reign of sin and death. “From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things – and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (St. Matthew 10 v 21). Not what Peter was wanting or expecting! “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (v22). And thus Peter voices the very temptation that follows Jesus from the temptations in the wilderness to the temptations in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Lord, if it be possible, remove this Cup from me” (26 v 39). And so Jesus cries out and rebukes Peter, “Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me!” (16 v 23).

From Caesarea Philippi onwards, Jesus not only indicates that He Himself will suffer, but that if the disciples are to be His true followers, they also must expect to suffer, to share His Sufferings (16 v 24f; 20 v 17f). The disciples, like us, struggle to come to terms with this vocation to (redemptive) suffering – they ran away from sharing in the sufferings of Jesus (26 v 56, “then all the disciples forsook Him and fled”). It may be that we shall find ourselves in a similar situation, when the peer pressure of friends, or the antagonism of contemporary society, will encourage us to be silent, to falter, even to deny Jesus or, perhaps, to deny His importance to us, His significance for us, His centrality in our lives – “You also are a catholic!” – “ I don’t know what you mean!” (26 v 69/70).

We know that St. Peter repented (St. Luke 22 v 62; 22 v 32) and that he learnt not to withdraw, even from death, in following Jesus in the Way of the Cross (St. John 21 v 18f). St. Paul, also, followed in the Way of the Cross. He lists his sufferings, not as complaints, but as honoured sufferings and wounds for the sake of Christ – imprisonments, countless beatings “and often near to death”, lashed thirty-nine times (not once but on five occasions), stoned and ship-wrecked - three times! (2 Corinthians 11 v 23f).

Today we celebrate their joint Ministry, which they shared for (approximately) thirty years in establishing and encouraging the Church throughout the Empire, and their joint Martyrdom in the city of Rome – St Peter crucified in Nero’s Circus to the side of Vatican Hill (AD 64) and St. Paul beheaded outside the walls of the city (AD 67). In the Propers of the Mass today we celebrate, “Peter, foremost in confessing the faith, who established the Church from the remnant of Israel” and “Paul, its most outstanding preacher, master and teacher of the Gentiles that You call” – “ so each, in a different way, gathered together the one family of Christ; and revered together throughout the world, they share one Martyr’s crown” .St. Peter and St. Paul – Pray for us!

Today would have been the occasion for our First Holy Communion Mass. Please remember our children and young people in your prayers (amongst many others!) many of whom have had their lives and education severely disrupted in recent months. Let us pray that when the churches re-open for the public celebration of Mass we may, all of us, experience healing of any wounds we may have suffered during these last few months, and a new hunger and excitement to experience and explore more deeply our faith in the Risen Jesus, continuing to pray for a New Pentecost in the life of the Church. Amen!