

The Church and the World

As far as I am aware, the gospels recount only two occasions on which Jesus was moved to tears. One was on the death of his friend Lazarus, and the other was when he looked over the city of Jerusalem and pondered its future. He spoke of a failure by his generation to recognise the opportunity to change that God had given them, as if somehow they were blinded by an inability to see that the path way they were walking was leading them towards a real road block and that unless they changed course, they were going to hit the buffers. We in our generation have a lot to be thankful for; not least the fact that we are able to practice our faith in freedom and it is this freedom that we must treasure as the great gift forged by the two saints whose feast we keep this day.

In one sense this feast is really the feast of the Universal Church in the world. Peter and Paul actually have their own separate feast days: 25 January for Paul and 22 February for Peter, so this day has about it another dimension which asks us to call to mind the mission of the Church as a force for good in the world. Now of course many would argue that the Church has a rather chequered history on that score, but the pages of history, whilst keen to record her misdemeanours, don't really want to concern themselves too much with the countless deeds of love and charity that go on unnoticed and unrecorded. It is so much easier simply to bemoan the Church for her rigidity and dogmatic tendencies, which, her opponents argue, deny individual freedoms and rights. What her opponents fail to understand and recognise is that such individual freedoms and rights are themselves products of Christian moral thinking that have at their basis the teachings of Jesus. Let us never forget that the Sermon on the Mount upholds the practice of underscoring the dignity of the individual as created in the image and likeness of God, and as such upholds that every person, no matter what their status or condition in life, whether it be in the womb or at the end of their life's span, is precious and is to be loved and cared for without exception. This love comes from the belief that we are created beings, redeemed by love and called to live out that love in a community bound together with a shared purpose. The Church's mission is to keep this belief at the forefront of the world's conscience and to bring it to mind when the world starts to forget it.

Peter and Paul embody this mission of spreading the gospel and proclaiming its values to the world, and in doing so they became the great trailblazers along which so many others have travelled. What is our response to this? Primarily we have to see ourselves as co-workers in the task of keeping the conscience of the world awake and alert. In fact we have to be that conscience, constantly reminding the world that what is good and right is also life enhancing. It is not an easy task, nor is it one that we necessarily feel capable of carrying out. Remember Peter himself was told that he would be led to places he would rather not go, and Paul was ridiculed and laughed at by his opponents, but they knew they spoke the truth.

As we look at the world today we see many situations which bring us to tears. We need to remind the world and those in authority that the Church, without exception and following the examples of Peter and Paul, will constantly proclaim the message of Jesus Christ in all its fullness, as a message of love, of truth, of peace and of salvation for all.