



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **Solemnity of Sts Peter & Paul, Year B**

### ***The unlikely couple***

*Readings: Acts 12: 1-11, Ps 34, 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 17-18, Matthew 16: 13-19*

Take a twenty minute bus ride out of the centre of Rome and you come to the marble extravaganza of the suburb of EUR, a monument to the brief and inglorious reign of Benito Mussolini. Disembarking and walking down the throbbing dual carriageway, there is a sudden and sharp turn into another world. The path leads down, through a tree-lined and all-embracing silence, into the grounds of the ancient abbey of Tre Fontane, the Three Fountains.

Here, in this Trappist oasis of calm and tranquility, you will find three churches. At the far end of the grounds is Tre Fontane itself. It is the place where St. Paul, enjoying the privilege of a Roman citizen, was martyred by being beheaded rather than suffer the extended torture of crucifixion, which was reserved for the non-citizen in the brutal purge instituted by the Emperor Nero in his quest for scapegoats in the wake of the great fire of Rome. You may stand in the little prison cell where St. Paul spent his last few days. For me, it is one of the most moving places in the Eternal City. To be able to kneel and pray where the 'Teacher of the World', the great missionary evangelist, the man who opened the

door to the Gentile world and made possible the Universal Church, made his final act of devotion and faith, is an extraordinary privilege.

Sweeping back into the heart of Rome, into the throb of Vatican City, surrounded by thousands of ignorant camera-toting tourists, under the great baldachino of Bernini, down the winding stone staircase, behind the Clementine chapel, rest the bones of a 60 something, first century martyr wrapped in purple cloth, surrounded by graves imploring his prayers. It is the burial place of St Peter, the very site of his martyrdom, the upsidedown crucifixion, the foundation stone of the Catholic Church in his confession of faith and the source of the magisterial authority of the Papal office.

Here, on this hill named for the Etruscan goddess of the underworld and of the unborn, Vattika, we may also kneel surrounded by the hubbub of the world and give thanks to Almighty God for the blood of the martyrs. Two very different men, yoked together by their profound love of and service to Jesus.

Two men whose lives are at the very heart of the faith of the Universal Church. The fanatical Pharisee and persecutor, the intellectual tentmaker who had sat at the feet of the great rabbi, Gamaliel, who, by his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, became the preacher, teacher, missionary supreme and channel of the great words of God's grace that illuminate the books of the New Covenant and instruct the Church down all the ages. And the humble fisherman whose passion for Christ equalled only by his impetuous nature and frequent failures, was appointed by Jesus to be the rock of reference, the template of

authority, the leader of the little pilgrim band that would become the Catholic Church and, changing history, restore the destiny of Fallen Man.

If it was a 'marriage made in Heaven', it must have seemed all too unlikely to human judgement. But that is how God chose to play it out in the final throw of the dice in the long history of Salvation. Ours is simply to be grateful, to honour their memory on this great feast day, to invoke their prayers often, to read and follow their spirit-inspired words in the Holy Scriptures and to share in the mission of the Universal Church to call the nations to repentance and to be embraced by the love of God and reclaim our eternal destiny in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.

On Thursday this week we will put our cross on one of a largely uninspiring and inconsequential choices for the future of our land. For followers of Christ the Crosses that truly matter for the future of our eternal destiny are THE CROSS OF JESUS - the One on the Calvary, from which Salvation flows, and which St Paul always and everywhere preached. THE UPSIDE DOWN CROSS of St Peter on the Vatican Hill whence the authority of the Universal Church was planted and that other CROSS on Golgotha, next to Jesus, where we, the fallen but penitent thieves, hang and pray, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

St Peter and Saint Paul.....pray for us.