

## Reflection – Feast of Sts Peter & Paul

Within a generation or two of the resurrection the followers of Jesus had a distinctive identity separate from the Jewish faith. Indeed, in Antioch they had been given the distinctive name of “Christian” which helped to set them apart. During this time, the city which was the central focus of their activities had also moved from Jerusalem to Rome. So, how did this come about? The answer to that question is bound up in the lives of the two Saints we celebrate today, Peter and Paul.

After Pentecost Peter stayed in Jerusalem for a considerable period of time and his preaching and miracles are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Later, however, he travelled and preached the Gospel in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Antioch and Rome where he was crucified by the despotic Emperor Nero on the Vatican Hill. Rome was, of course, at that time the centre of a mighty empire. According to Eusebius, St. Mark accompanied Peter on his journeys and preserved Peter’s memories of the story of Jesus in the Gospel he wrote. Peter is also attributed with writing two letters which are to be found in the New Testament.

Paul had never met Jesus in the flesh. His story is very different. He was born with the name Saul in the city of Tarsus of Jewish parents. It’s possible that his parents had been brought to Tarsus as Roman slaves and that their master, an enlightened man, had bestowed Roman citizenship upon them. Having the status of a Roman citizen was something which would prove important to Saul later in life. Saul was a devout, religious young man who, when he gained his independence, took himself off to Jerusalem to study more about his faith under Gamaliel. He became a complete zealot for the cause and set about the destruction of what he saw as the new Jesus nonsense and the extermination of its adherents. Saul was in fact on a mission to Damascus to round up Christians when he was struck down on his journey and encountered Jesus in the blinding light. After this he changed his name to Paul and applied all his zeal and energy to promoting the Christian faith he had so recently sought to destroy. He made three missionary journeys spreading the Christian message around so many centres of the Roman Empire and known world. When others sought to prosecute Paul and silence his Christian message, he invoked his Roman citizenship and privileged position asking for his trial to be heard in Rome. Eventually he was taken to Rome, held for a long time under house arrest and allowed to continue some of his Christian activity before his trial and execution. Being a Roman citizen he was spared the suffering, agony and ignominy of crucifixion and was beheaded outside the city of Rome’s walls

So, we see the spread of the Christian faith through the labours of Peter and Paul and because both died in Rome and the Christians were expelled from Jerusalem, the centre of the Christian faith became associated with Rome.