



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – June 2008

SS Peter and Paul

ON MY TRIP to Rome for some Study Leave this April – a first visit for me – I found myself in close proximity to Peter, but not as close as I should have liked to Paul. The obelisk in the centre of St Peter's Square marks the traditional place of Peter's martyrdom and, beneath the basilica itself, there is what archaeologists have increasingly endorsed as the tomb of Peter. I could manage the tombs of the popes, just beneath St Peter's, but a trip to the *escavi* – deep down below St Peter's – is not advisable for a claustrophobic. As for the successor of Peter, he was not giving a general audience that week, having returned from a trip to the USA, so I seem to be one of very few Anglican bishops who have no picture of themselves on the mantelpiece, shaking hands with the Pope.

In saying that I was not as close to Paul as I should have liked, what I meant is that just about the only historic church I didn't visit was the Basilica of St Paul-without-the-Walls, a place of great significance for Anglicans. This Basilica, where St Paul is buried, is a reminder of the necessary balance between Peter and Paul in our understanding of the apostolic tradition. It is part of our recent history that Popes and Archbishops of Canterbury have stood side by side at that basilica. And it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that one of the wonders of our own age, theologically speaking, is how well the modern Catholic Church, through the Second Vatican Council, has brought back into balance and perspective the two apostolic strands, the strand of Peter and the strand of Paul.

The two strands can be traced back to the earliest traditions of the Church. St Ignatius of Antioch (and Peter himself had been at Antioch) was the generation after St Peter, dying in about 107AD. He tells us about the apostolic succession of bishops, priests and deacons, communicated through the laying on of hands. St Irenaeus of Lyons, a hundred years later, is very much like St Paul, laying great stress on the continuity of apostolic preaching – handing the Faith on intact, without messing around with it, as we seem to like to do nowadays.

The Church needs the sacrament of ministry, preserved in, by, and through Peter and the apostolic succession. Ignatius was strong on that. The Church also needs the faithful handing on of the teaching of Paul and of the apostles. Irenaeus was strong on that. How appropriate it is, then, that nowadays we keep 29th June as the Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul! How appropriate it is that at Pentecost - (should we rename it Peter-and-Paul-tide?) – we ordain new deacons and priests to maintain the succession of ministry, to maintain the tradition of proclamation of 'the catholic faith that comes to us from the apostles', as the First Eucharistic Prayer puts it.

May God bless us as we seek to live out and preach the Faith of SS Peter and Paul.

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