

21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Located on the outskirts of Rome, the Basilica of St. Paul's—outside—the-Walls traces the two thousand year history of the Church in a unique way. The building is not that old. It was rebuilt after the original fourth century church was destroyed by fire in 1823. Some parts still remain from those early centuries, notably St Paul's tomb and the magnificent cloister.

However, it's a series of round mosaics, high up above the columns, which links the Church across the ages back to its first beginnings. The mosaics carry images of all the popes from St Peter to the present day. Each picture recalls the person responsible for guiding and shepherding the Church at a particular time in Christian history. Through his predecessor, every one of these Bishops of Rome received the same authority first given by Jesus to the apostle Peter. They form a chain of continuity, guaranteeing the Church's faithfulness to Christ. It's an impressive line-up. While they had very different personalities, the popes were entrusted with the ministry of strengthening the Church on the solid foundation of faith.

At the moment there are a few empty frames, ready and waiting to be filled with the images of new popes yet to be elected. There's a tradition that when all the mosaics are complete, it will signal the end of the world. So let's hope that the authorities at St. Paul's will do what previous generations have done and make sure that there are always a few spare places.

The encounter between Jesus and Simon Peter in the Gospel is of central significance for what we believe about the Church. Jesus shows himself to be the wisest of teachers. He leads his disciples forward in faith, questioning them, allowing them to grow in understanding. He moves quickly from enquiring about what others think and say about him, to wanting to know what the **disciples** believe. Jesus doesn't want a second-hand opinion. Nothing but a personal response is acceptable. "But you" he said, "who do you say I am?" Perhaps there were many other answers that were never recorded in the Gospel – we'll never know. What we do know, however, is that the most important response came from Peter.

The Gospels show us how complex a character Peter was. He combined absolute enthusiasm with complete unreliability. How reassuring that someone so clearly flawed could become the rock on which Jesus would rely and depend to build the Church. It's an encouragement for us all.

Peter announced the core belief of Christian faith: that Jesus is the Christ, the Holy One, the Son of the living God. He recognised Jesus for who he was and, in the presence of such faith, Jesus confirmed Peter as the foundation stone on which the Church would be established. On that day, Peter spoke for every disciple who would ever live; and through his successors, the popes. His voice is alive and clear in the world today.

In his first homily preached after his election, Pope Benedict XVI told the assembled cardinals how his mind turned to the region of Caesarea Philippi two thousand years ago. He described how it seemed that the words of Peter and Jesus were being relived in his own life. With a certain apprehension, he found himself repeating what he described as “the anxious words of the fisherman from Galilee” – “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And, with what he called “intimate emotion”, he listened again to the “reassuring promise of the divine Master” – “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.”

In our own discipleship, whatever our particular vocation, Jesus invites us to relive a personal answer to his question: “Who do you say that I am ?” More or less confidently, our faith will allow or desire us to proclaim, with the Church, “you are the Christ.” And no matter how challenging our circumstances, we too receive from the Lord the reassuring promise that we are the living stones that build up his body, the Church.

Like the rocks of the earth, we are different shapes and sizes, ages and colours. We have different qualities and strengths. Some are best suited for one purpose, others for another, but all are necessary. Our common identity, our unity, is in belonging to the Church founded on Peter and the apostles and sharing their faith, a faith in Jesus the Son of the living God who reveals to us a love that is eternal.