

Readings for Today: Acts 12: 1 – 11; Ps 34(33); 2 Timothy 4: 6 – 8, 17 – 18; Matthew 16: 13 – 19.

Let us come to the athletes of the recent past: let us take the noble examples of our own generation...Let us set before our eyes the good Apostles.

Peter, who...having borne witness proceeded to his due place of glory...

Paul...bore witness before rulers. Then he passed from the world and went to the holy place.

These words come from a letter written by Clement of Rome to the Church in Corinth, probably in the last decade of the first century. They witness to the belief that the apostles whom we celebrate today suffered martyrdom in the city of Rome. Other references in the letter support the belief that they were put to death as part of the persecution of Christians ordered by the Emperor Nero following the fire of Rome in AD 64. These martyrs are described by Tacitus (no friend of the Christians) as 'set up as culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty' on Nero's orders. The tradition is that Peter, as a non-citizen, was crucified in a public display, and Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded outside the city. The sites of their burials, Peter's near the circus on the Vatican hill, Paul's beside the road to Ostia, were remembered by the Christian community. Archaeological investigation under the Vatican Basilica has revealed a monument dating from about AD 160, the site of which subsequent building works, from the Emperor Constantine onwards, have carefully followed, so that the Papal altar in the Basilica stands over the site of the original burial place of Saint Peter.

The Basilica of Saint Paul-outside-the-walls was largely rebuilt in the 19th century, after a fire, but the tomb, with its Latin inscription 'TO PAUL APOSTLE MARTYR', survives, supporting the existence here of a monument, like that to Peter at the Vatican, from the mid second century.

From the middle of the third century there is evidence of a joint celebration of the two apostles on 29th June, and of a building dedicated to their memory on the site of what is now the Basilica of Saint Sebastian on the Appian Way. There can be seen many scratched requests for the prayers of Peter and Paul.

Our celebration today continues this tradition of prayer, dating to the beginnings of the Church in Rome, founded on the preaching and, above all on the martyrdom, of the apostles Peter and Paul.