June 29: Sts Peter and Paul, Apostles (Mt 16:13-19)

 **SAVIOUR SON OF GOD**

The gospel (Mt 16:13-20) has two parts: *first,* Peter, as spokesman for the Twelve, professes his faith in Jesus as the Messiah (Mt 16:13-16.20), and *second*, Jesus promises that Peter will be pre-eminent (Mt 16:17-19).

In Matthew, Peter’s profession of faith actually goes further than acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. Peter calls Jesus also “the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Matthew is strong on the “Son of God” title (cf. Mt 4:3, 14:33).

At the time, the first event (Peter’s profession of faith) may not have been followed by the second event (Jesus’ promise to Peter). But there was an important reason why Matthew joined the two events in his gospel.

By the time of his writing, the Christian community had definitely broken with Israel’s synagogue. As Jesus expresses it in Matthew’s gospel, “Any plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots” (Mt 15:13). The disciples of Christ must abandon Israel: “Leave them alone” (Mt 15:14), says Jesus, who turns his back on them: “Leaving them standing there, he went away” (Mt 16:4b), a terrible indictment.

But that situation raises a problem. A Messiah without a people to save is unthinkable. Matthew immediately introduces the new people of God to fill the vacuum left by the Messiah’s rejection of Israel. Jesus announces the church, that is, the assembly of his people that he calls together. He founds this people on himself and on his Twelve Apostles. After his departure, the foundation will be pre-eminently on the Rock, Peter.

Jesus gives to Peter the keys of entry into the assembly of his people and, through his church, into the kingdom of God. Jesus clearly intends to provide for his church so that it does not collapse after Peter’s death. “The gates of the underworld can never hold out against it” (Mt 16:18). So, the promise of Jesus must hold good not only for Peter but also for his successors.

Jesus addresses his questions to everyone: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13); and to the individual, “But you, who do you say I am?” (Mt 16:16).

Amid the increasing hostility of the Jewish leaders and the lack of understanding of the crowds, and in order to concentrate on the formation of his disciples, especially of the Twelve, Jesus poses a “vote of confidence” in himself.

Peter, on behalf of the others, makes a positive profession of faith: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In fact, says Jesus, it is the Father who has revealed it to Peter. For that reason, Christ will build his Church on Peter.

But Jesus must be accepted as the “*suffering* Servant and Saviour”. Here Peter objects on the strength of a purely human thought, and becomes “a stumbling block”. For this, Jesus will pray for his “conversion”, so that he can strengthen his brothers (Lk 22:31).

All of this holds good for us. In front of Jesus, we must take up a position: openly declare ourselves for Christ the crucified and risen Saviour; belong to Christ in his Church built on Peter, the rock; allow ourselves to weep with Peter over our past unfaithfulness, and be confirmed in the faith by the same Peter who has the power and the mission from Christ to strengthen our faith.

While we celebrate the Eucharist, we recognize in Jesus Christ him whom the world awaited as the Messiah, liberator and saviour. More than that, we acclaim him as the Son of God. Today, we welcome him as the living bread come down from heaven to satisfy everyone’s hunger.

In this Eucharist, let us place Jesus at the centre of our hopes, for ourselves personally, and for the Church that he has assembled, and for the world at large. In the General Intercessions, let us pray that our Saviour and our God will provide for the pressing needs of the Church and the world.