

## Peter, Saint of the English, and Paul, the Great Evangelist



According to the renowned travel writer, H V Morton, the word ‘borgo’ is not Italian in spite of the fact that around St Peter’s basilica in Rome many of the streets will have names such as Borgo Pio or Borgo Sant’Angelo. He claims that ‘borgo’ is a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon word burgh or borough and it is found in the environs of St Peter’s basilica because the Saxons were the first people to colonise the area around the place of burial of the body of St Peter. And this is indeed, true. The Saxons from this country were the ones who effectively invented the Rome pilgrimage, known as ‘roaming’, and were the first to establish a national colony there, and because they were the first, they took over the area immediately adjacent to St Peter’s and settled there. The area is still known as the Borgo Sassone, or the Saxon Quarter. They built a hospital and a church dedicated to the Holy Spirit in the street alongside St Peter’s known to this day as Santo

Spirito in Sassia, and a refuge for pilgrims known as the Schola Saxonum, all references to the local Saxon population.

The Saxons of England were very holy and pious people unlike the Normans who defeated them. They were very rough and ready, more interested in waging war than saying their prayers. I'm descended from them, and perhaps it shows. But the Saxons were seriously religious and they had a great devotion to St Peter. They named the great Cathedral they built in London after the saint and what we know as Westminster Abbey is, in fact, more correctly known as the Abbey Church of St Peter. Many Saxon towns reflect this devotion to Peter - Petersfield just up the Road, Peterborough, Petersham, Ampney St Peter and so on. This devotion to St Peter expressed itself in a desire among the Saxons to travel to Rome to visit the tomb of the saint and, for many, to settle there. A number of Anglo-Saxon kings and queens even gave up their thrones to go and end their days alongside the body of their favourite saint because they believed that if they showed great devotion to St Peter, he who kept the gates of the kingdom of heaven would be more likely to let them in.

We mustn't forget Paul as this is his feast too. The two were very different characters. Peter was impulsive and foolhardy, rushing in where angels fear to tread and then losing his courage. One moment he said he was ready to die for the Lord, the next he was denying him. Yet, for all his failings, he was the one Jesus chose to succeed him as head of the Church.

While Peter was ready to leave his family life and his fishing business to follow Jesus at the drop of a net, Paul was not so easily won. Implacably opposed to Jesus and his followers he dedicated his life to pursuing the disciples, arresting them and having them stoned to death to stamp out this pervasive new religion. It took the vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, which floored Paul and blinded him, to get him to change his mind, but change it he did. From being the fiercest persecutor of the faith he became its staunchest and most energetic defender, travelling far and wide to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and even suffering persecution himself for his trouble. Paul was a difficult man to work with and didn't suffer fools gladly, but he got the job done. Without his amazing pioneering energy and zeal, there would be no universal Church today.

Peter and Paul, though giants of the Church without whose work and witness the Church would not have survived, were also faulted men with human failings just like us. They are testament to the fact that God can use each and any of us to do his work in spite of our human imperfections because, as St Paul says, 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength'. So, do not be shy to offer yourself and your gifts - and your failings - to do the work of God, for the kingdom built on the foundations of Peter and Paul is still building and it needs new labourers to complete the task.