

Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Monday 22nd June

St John Fisher & St Thomas More



St. Thomas More

St. John Fisher

First reading

2 Kings 17:5-8,13-15,18

There was none left, but the tribe of Judah only

The king of Assyria invaded the whole country and, coming to Samaria, laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah on the Habor, a river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

This happened because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the grip of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshipped other gods, they followed the practices of the nations that the Lord had dispossessed for them.

And yet through all the prophets and all the seers, the Lord had given Israel and Judah this warning, 'Turn from your wicked ways and keep my commandments and my laws in accordance with the entire Law I laid down for your fathers and delivered to them through my servants the prophets.' But they would not listen, they were more stubborn than their ancestors had been who had no faith in the Lord their God. They despised his laws and the covenant he had made with their ancestors, and the warnings he had given them. They pursued emptiness, and themselves became empty through copying the nations round them although the Lord had ordered them not to act as they did. For this, the Lord was enraged with Israel and thrust them away from him. There was none left but the tribe of Judah only.

Gospel Acclamation**Jn17:17**

Alleluia, alleluia!
Your word is truth, O Lord:
consecrate us in the truth.
Alleluia!

Gospel**Matthew 7:1-5****Do not judge, and you will not be judged**

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; because the judgements you give are the judgements you will get, and the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given. Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own? How dare you say to your brother, "Let me take the splinter out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own? Hypocrite! Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother's eye.'

Fr Tim's Reflection

Under David and Solomon the 12 tribes of Israel were united and strong. The division came after the death of Solomon, with two kings ruling. Though God sent prophet after prophet to warn the people and their rulers, they preferred to worship other gods rather than the one true God. Politically and spiritually weakened, the kingdoms became easy picking to the other empires that surrounded them. In the first reading today, the Assyrians take over the northern kingdom, and the southern kingdom is reduced to little more than the city of Jerusalem. The author of this passage is clear about what is to blame for this calamity: "The Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God". The events described in today's reading took place in 723, that is 200 years after the death of Solomon. The kingdom of Judah was able to hold on by a thread until 586, when Zedekiah and the remaining Israelites were carried off into exile in Babylon.

The deportation to Babylon was an enormous shock to God's chosen people, but their time in exile gave them an opportunity to work out where they had gone wrong. A fond hope was cherished that one day they would be able to return to the promised land.

The gospel reminds us of how difficult it is for us to recognise and correct our own faults. All too often it is easier to concentrate on the errors of others. Fortunately for us, God is only too happy to help us if we ask for that help.

We celebrate the feast day of two reformation heroes of the Catholic Church in England today. On 22nd June 1535 John Fisher, then bishop of Rochester and chancellor of the University of Cambridge, was executed for refusing to accept Henry VIII as head of the church in England. He was the prime supporter of Catherine of Aragon when Henry was trying to divorce her. He was friends with Thomas More, then Lord High Chancellor of England, who followed him to a martyr's death 2 years later. More, rather than vocalise his opposition to the King's divorce, simply refused to endorse it. The play and film "A man of all seasons" follows this last part of his life. More defended an individual's right to remain silent. Unfortunately this did not save him from Henry's ire.

John Fisher, being stripped of his bishopric and other titles, was treated as a commoner and was condemned to be hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. Many in London saw a parallel with St John the Baptist, and it was ironical that his execution occurred on the eve of the feast of the Baptist's beheading.

Thomas More received a similar sentence, but Henry commuted this to a simple beheading. His famous last words were: "I am the King's good servant, but God's first". As his last direct descendent (also a Thomas More) entered the Society of Jesus, Stonyhurst is now the custodian of many of his personal belongings. These two men were probably the greatest thinkers in Tudor England.

Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Tuesday 23rd June



First reading

2 Kings 19:9-11,14-21,31-36

The Lord protects Jerusalem from Sennacherib and the Assyrians

Sennacherib, King of the Assyrians, sent messengers to Hezekiah saying, ‘Tell this to Hezekiah king of Judah, “Do not let your God on whom you are relying deceive you, when he says: Jerusalem shall not fall into the power of the king of Assyria. You have learnt by now what the kings of Assyria have done to every country, putting them all under the ban. Are you likely to be spared?”’

Hezekiah took the letter from the hands of the messenger and read it; he then went up to the Temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. Hezekiah said this prayer in the presence of the Lord, ‘O Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, enthroned on the cherubs, you alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth, you have made heaven and earth.

‘Give ear, Lord, and listen.

Open your eyes, Lord, and see.

Hear the words of Sennacherib

who has sent to insult the living God.

‘It is true, O Lord, that the kings of Assyria have exterminated all the nations, they have thrown their gods on the fire, for these were not gods but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone, and hence they have destroyed them. But now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, I pray you, and let all the kingdoms of the earth know that you alone are God, the Lord.’

Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah. ‘The Lord, the God of Israel,’ he said, ‘says this, “I have heard the prayer you have addressed to me about Sennacherib king of Assyria.” Here is the oracle that the Lord has pronounced against him:

“She despises you, she scorns you,
the virgin, daughter of Zion;
she tosses her head behind you,
the daughter of Jerusalem.”

‘This, then, is what the Lord says about the king of Assyria:

“He will not enter this city,
he will let fly no arrow against it,
confront it with no shield,
throw up no earthwork against it.
By the road that he came on he will return;
he shall not enter this city. It is the Lord who speaks.
I will protect this city and save it
for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

That same night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. Sennacherib struck camp and left; he returned home and stayed in Nineveh.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 47(48):2-4,10-11

Gospel Acclamation

Mt11:25

Alleluia, alleluia!
Blessed are you, Father,
Lord of heaven and earth,
for revealing the mysteries of the kingdom
to mere children.
Alleluia!

Gospel

Matthew 7:6,12-14

Treat others as you would like them to treat you

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls in front of pigs, or they may trample them and then turn on you and tear you to pieces.

‘So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets.
‘Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to perdition is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.’

Fr Tim’s reflection:

In the first reading, God protects the remnant of his people, then taking refuge in Jerusalem. For the time being they are safe. Perhaps this led to the belief that they were invincible. History would prove them wrong.

In the gospel we learn that it is a hard road and a narrow gate that we must find and take if we wish to have life. It appears that only a few will find it.

The first reading also mentions Isaiah, perhaps the greatest of all the prophets of the Old Testament. In fact we now believe that the book that bears his name was written by three different people. It certainly addresses three distinct moments in the history of the people of Israel. Chapters 1 to 42 of the book of Isaiah covers this period just before the fall of Jerusalem, so the Isaiah mentioned today is indeed the author of this first part of the book. Perhaps the second and third parts of the book were written by subsequent generations of his followers.

Isaiah is such a giant in the history of Israel precisely because he tries to work out the theological implications of what is happening in his own time. As the kingdom of Israel was destroyed and the kingdom of Judah was shrinking fast as greater powers were devouring their land, it did not take much ability to look into the future and to come to the conclusion that the days of Jerusalem were numbered. Isaiah had to address the question: “Why was God allowing this to happen to hit people to whom he had made so many promises to be faithful forever?” Since God is always faithful and never goes back on his word, Isaiah can only conclude that the fault lies with the people who have failed to keep their end of the bargain. As we shall see, deportation, becoming enslaved again to a foreign power, is looking increasingly likely.

Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Wednesday 24th June

The martyrdom of St John the Baptist



First reading

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Go and say whatever I command you and do not fear

The word of the Lord was addressed to me, saying,
'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;
before you came to birth I consecrated you;
I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.'
I said, 'Ah, Lord; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!'
But the Lord replied,
'Do not say, "I am a child."
Go now to those to whom I send you
and, say whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to protect you –
it is the Lord who speaks!'
Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me:
'There! I am putting my words into your mouth.
Look, today I am setting you
over nations and over kingdoms,
to tear up and to knock down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.'

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 70(71):1-6,15,17

Second reading

1 Peter 1:8-12

You did not see Christ, yet you love him

You did not see Jesus Christ, yet you love him; and still without seeing him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe; and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward, that is, the salvation of your souls.

It was this salvation that the prophets were looking and searching so hard for; their prophecies were about the grace which was to come to you. The Spirit of Christ which was in them foretold the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would come after them, and they tried to find out at what time and in what circumstances all this was to be expected. It was revealed to them that the news they brought of all the things which have now been announced to you, by those who preached to you the Good News through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, was for you and not for themselves. Even the angels long to catch a glimpse of these things.

Gospel Acclamation

Jn1:7;Lk1:17

Alleluia, alleluia!

He came as a witness,
as a witness to speak for the light,
preparing for the Lord a people fit for him.
Alleluia!

Gospel

Luke 1:5-17

'Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son'

In the days of King Herod of Judaea there lived a priest called Zechariah who belonged to the Abijah section of the priesthood, and he had a wife, Elizabeth by name, who was a descendant of Aaron. Both were worthy in the sight of God, and scrupulously observed all the commandments and observances of the Lord. But they were childless: Elizabeth was barren and they were both getting on in years.

Now it was the turn of Zechariah's section to serve, and he was exercising his priestly office before God when it fell to him by lot, as the ritual custom was, to enter the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense there. And at the hour of incense the whole congregation was outside, praying.

Then there appeared to him the angel of the Lord, standing on the right of the altar of incense. The sight disturbed Zechariah and he was overcome with fear. But the angel said to him, 'Zechariah, do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son and you must name him John. He will be your joy and delight and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord; he must drink no wine, no strong drink. Even from his mother's womb he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will bring back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him to turn the hearts of fathers towards their children and the disobedient back to the wisdom that the virtuous have, preparing for the Lord a people fit for him.'

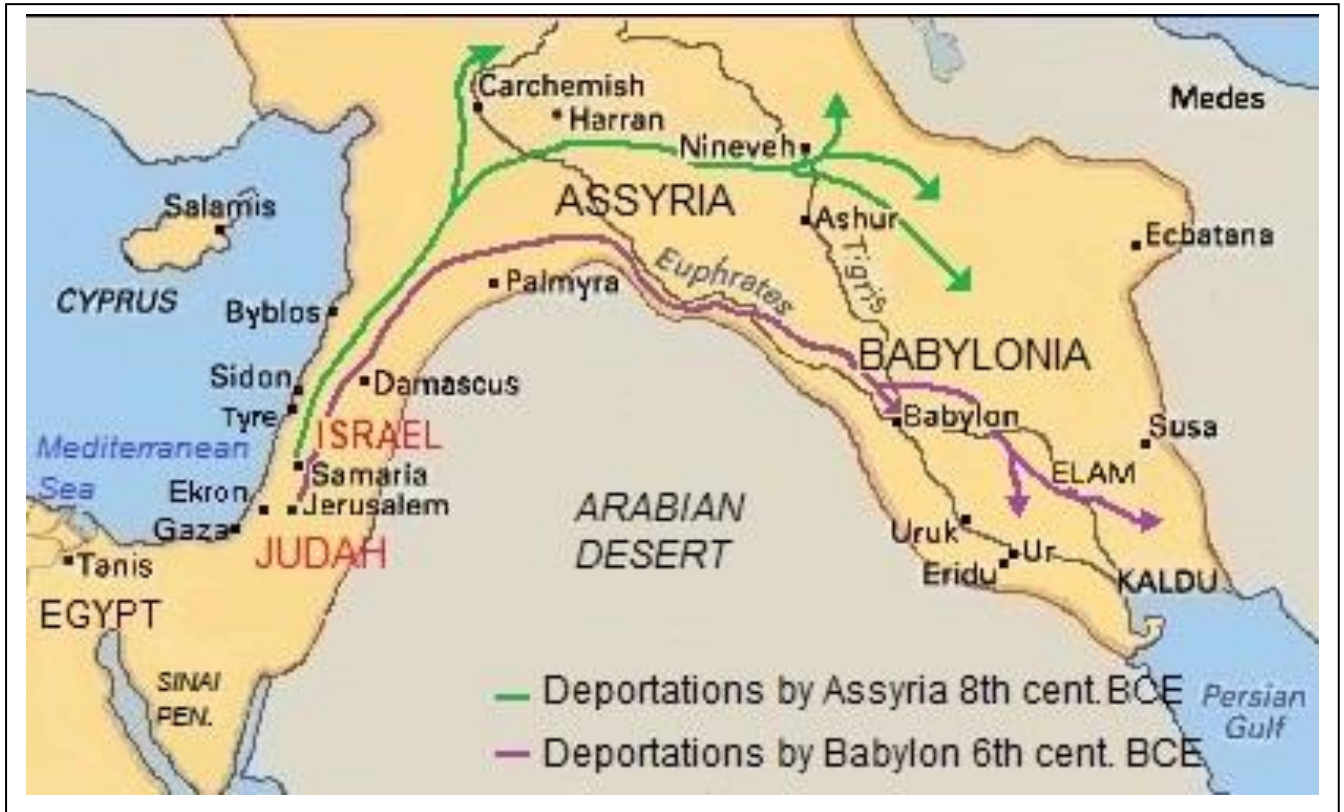
Fr Tim's Reflection

The normal cycle of readings is broken today, as we celebrate this feast day in honour of the birthday of St John the Baptist. In the Church's liturgy we normally celebrate the anniversary of a saint's death. Only three people are important enough to warrant a celebration of their birth: Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist. The Baptist's birthday is spaced out to be 6 months before Christmas. So just as Christmas takes place at the same time as the winter solstice, so the birthday of John the Baptist is close to mid-summer's day.

There are some parallels between the birth of Jesus and the birth of his cousin John. The good news is imparted by an angel of the Lord. In the case of Mary, she is at home when Gabriel announces the news that she is to be the mother of the saviour of the world. Zachariah, on the other hand, is serving in the temple and is actually in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part. The big difference however, is the response: Mary says "Let this be done to me according to your will". Zachariah, on the other hand, doubted the angel, thinking it impossible that he and his wife would conceive. As a result he was struck dumb until after John's birth. John was the one who would be the herald of the ministry of Jesus, so, symbolically, the power of speech was handed on from father to son.

Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Thursday 19th June



First reading

2 Kings 24:8-17

The first deportation into captivity in Babylon

Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he came to the throne, and he reigned for three months in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Nehushta, daughter of Elnathan, from Jerusalem. He did what is displeasing to the Lord, just as his father had done.

At that time the troops of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched on Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon himself came to attack the city while his troops were besieging it. Then Jehoiachin king of Judah surrendered to the king of Babylon, he, his mother, his officers, his nobles and his eunuchs, and the king of Babylon took them prisoner. This was in the eighth year of King Nebuchadnezzar.

The latter carried off all the treasures of the Temple of the Lord and the treasures of the royal palace, and broke up all the golden furnishings that Solomon king of Israel had made for the sanctuary of the Lord, as the Lord had foretold. He carried off all Jerusalem into exile, all the nobles and all the notables, ten thousand of these were exiled, with all the blacksmiths and metalworkers; only the poorest people in the country were left behind. He deported Jehoiachin to Babylon, as also the king's mother, his eunuchs and the nobility of the country; he made them all leave Jerusalem for exile in Babylon. All the men of distinction, seven thousand of them, the blacksmiths and metalworkers, one thousand of them, all of them men capable of bearing arms, were led into exile in Babylon by the king of Babylon.

The king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in succession to him, and changed his name to Zedekiah.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 78(79):1-5,8-9

Gospel Acclamation

Heb4:12

Alleluia, alleluia!

The word of God is something alive and active:
it can judge secret emotions and thoughts.

Alleluia!

Gospel

Matthew 7:21-29

The wise man built his house on a rock

Jesus said to his disciples: 'It is not those who say to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven. When the day comes many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, work many miracles in your name?" Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, you evil men!

'Therefore, everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house, and it did not fall: it was founded on rock. But everyone who listens to these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a stupid man who built his house on sand. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and struck that house, and it fell; and what a fall it had!'

Jesus had now finished what he wanted to say, and his teaching made a deep impression on the people because he taught them with authority, and not like their own scribes.

Fr Tim's Reflection

We can date the events in today's first reading precisely. The king in Jerusalem was deported to Babylon in the year 586 Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city and took every one of any note to Babylon. He put in place a puppet king, but as we shall discover tomorrow, 9 years later he returned to flatten the city completely.

If the Exodus from Egypt was the high point of the history of the people of Israel, the deportation to Babylon was its lowest. However, in exile the Jewish community was able to thrive. This was a time of great introspection and many of the books in the Old Testament came to their present form during this period. As many Jews were able to read and write, they did not have too hard a time in exile. In fact, 40 years later when they were able to return, many didn't want to go! It was the moment to work out what had gone wrong!

Many stories date back to this period, the most notable being the adventures of Daniel. We see Jews rising to prominent positions in Babylon: Daniel was esteemed for his intelligence. The Jewish religion had to come to a new understanding of what it was for God to be on their side. They were the chosen race, but that did not mean that the Lord would help them win all of their battles. They had a lot to learn about faithfulness.

Having solid foundations is the point of the parable of Jesus in the gospel today. Perhaps Jesus had seen someone trying to build a house without firm foundations and suffering the consequences. At the time of Jesus most people built their house with mud walls and a thatch roof. They would have been heavy and would need to be anchored to solid ground. Rich people could build with wood, which would make the house cooler, but it would still need piles driven into the ground to keep it stable.

If our spiritual lives are a house that we are trying to construct, we need to make sure they are based on the sure foundation of faith. Like the community in Jerusalem at the time of the deportation, things happen that shake our faith to the core. We are fortunate that our faith is not just a neat set of truths that we believe. Rather, our faith is in a person and is about our relationship with that person.

Sometimes things happen that challenge our faith in Jesus. Why has he allowed the pandemic to happen? What is my economic future like? Will my family be kept safe? Does Jesus really care about me? It seems that if we want our faith to grow strong, this can only happen when faith is tested. We need to experience Jesus as the rock that underpins everything else in our lives. Jesus changed Simon's name to "Peter" which means rock, because Peter was to learn that he could utterly and completely depend on Jesus.

Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Friday 19th June



First reading

2 Kings 25:1-12

The sack of Jerusalem and the final deportation

In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with his whole army to attack Jerusalem; he pitched camp in front of the city and threw up earthworks round it. The city lay under siege till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. In the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, when famine was raging in the city and there was no food for the populace, a breach was made in the city wall. At once, the king made his escape under cover of dark, with all the fighting men, by way of the gate between the two walls, which is near the king's garden – the Chaldaeans had surrounded the city – and made his way towards the Arabah. The Chaldaean troops pursued the king and caught up with him in the plains of Jericho, where all his troops deserted. The Chaldaeans captured the king and took him to the king of Babylon at Riblah, who passed sentence on him. He had the sons of Zedekiah slaughtered before his eyes, then put out Zedekiah's eyes and, loading him with chains, carried him off to Babylon.

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month – it was in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon – Nebuzaradan, commander of the guard, an officer of the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. He burned down the Temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses in Jerusalem. The Chaldaean troops who accompanied the commander of the guard demolished the walls surrounding Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan, commander of the guard, deported the remainder of the population left behind in the city, the deserters who had gone over to the king of Babylon, and the rest of the common people. The commander of the guard left some of the humbler country people as vineyard workers and ploughmen.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 136(137):1-6

Gospel Acclamation

Ps144:13

Alleluia, alleluia!

The Lord is faithful in all his words
and loving in all his deeds.

Alleluia!

Gospel

Matthew 8:1-4

'If you want to, you can cure me'

After Jesus had come down from the mountain large crowds followed him. A leper now came up and bowed low in front of him. 'Sir,' he said 'if you want to, you can cure me.' Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said, 'Of course I want to! Be cured!' And his leprosy was cured at once. Then Jesus said to him, 'Mind you do not tell anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest and make the offering prescribed by Moses, as evidence for them.'

Fr Tim's reflection

As we are finding out, Matthew's gospel has more of the teachings of Jesus and less of his actions. There are five long "sermons" where Jesus addresses the people. Yesterday we finished the first of these, the sermon on the mount, so today Jesus is out and about doing what he does.

He encounters a leper: the story is an example of the attitude we need to adopt in prayer. The leper asks for a cure, but phrases it well, "Sir, if you want to you can cure me". Jesus does something brave, but he does it instinctively. He reaches out and touches the leper. "Of course I want to, be cured". Perhaps we can use the same strategy when we come before the Lord with our mixed bag of problems. We can ask the Lord for what we need him to do, but only if the Lord wants to do it. Giving him the option we may find ourselves being touched in a very unexpected way.

The puppet king Nebuchadnezzar put in to rule Jerusalem did not work out, so in the year 576 he returns to destroy the city. The beautiful temple constructed by Solomon 350 years previously is now destroyed with "not one stone standing on another". Only a few peasants are left behind to till the soil.

For the Jewish people, the temple was the symbol of the presence of God amongst them. It is where they went to worship and sacrifice. With the temple gone it must have seemed as if God had deserted his own people.

In exile, the Jews were to discover the presence of God, not in a building, but in their community. It was at this time that the synagogue came into being. The place where the community could come together to keep their faith alive. Sacrifice was impossible outside of the temple, so instead the community came together to tell their story. This is how their faith was to be kept alive. Listening to and reliving all that God had done for them in the past.

Now more than ever the written word came to the fore. Up to this time there had been "writings", pieces of scripture that retold the stories of the past. Now these are gathered together and edited to form a book that we call the Old Testament, but which was called at the time: the histories, the prophets and the songs. It was during the exile that Judaism became a religion of the book.

As we come to the end of this week, we can look forward to the feast we celebrate on Sunday: the feast of St Peter and St Paul, the two giants of our book, the New Testament.

This is an important feast for us as our church here at Stonyhurst is dedicated to St Peter. It means that this is our patronal feast. As old as our church is the St Peter's Guild. Our parish has been able to celebrate this feast day for the last 226 years. This year the celebration will be very different from what we normally do. However, as a parish, we can be proud of the fact that our patron was Peter – named as the bedrock of our faith. Hopefully we will soon be able to gather and celebrate appropriately.