

THEY ARE AT PEACE

Fr. Martin Chittadiyil V.C.

The Apostle of Jesus, Peter, spent the first seven years of his mission in Antioch and then many years in Rome. He was preaching to thousands, giving testimony to Jesus. Time was passing. Then the peaceful atmosphere of Rome was vitiated by the dark clouds of unrest. Emperor Nero could not put out a fire that gutted Rome. More than ruling, he was interested in art and music. People abused him for his inordinate passion for music, leading to the coining of the derisive saying “Nero fiddled while Rome burned”. He tried to put out the fire of the people’s ire by sprinkling the water of blatant lies. One of those lies led to the massacre of many Christians. He propagated that it was the believers in Jesus that were behind the devastating fire. Thus began the persecutions against Christians. It was a time when the believers of Christ were hunted out and brutally murdered. It was not possible to continue in Rome. Everyday fresh news of murders and massacres was coming out. It was impossible to preach the Gospel in such adverse circumstances.

Then one day Peter took a decision - flee from Rome to a secure place. Rome will not be peaceful again for long. Peter started running in the darkish hours of early dawn. He reached the main gate of Rome. Then he saw someone, he could not make out who, coming towards him. Who could be walking at this time when all the people are sound asleep? The figure was getting closer. Intuition made him kneel down. Yes, it was Jesus. Dragging a heavy cross, Jesus, tired and in agony, was right in front of him. In a feeble voice, Peter asked, “Lord, where are you going with this cross?” “To Rome. I am going there as your substitute to get crucified again!” The voice of Jesus was clear and strong. The soul of Peter murmured to him, “As you are fleeing, turning your face against the crosses you have to bear for your Lord, he is replacing you to be crucified again.” Peter spoke instantly, “No, Lord! You don’t need to be crucified again on my behalf. Now it is my turn to partake in the suffering of my Lord and Master.” Peter took the cross from the shoulders of the Lord and placed it on his own shoulders. He was returning to the place from where he was fleeing to become a witness of the Gospel of Suffering, to become a martyr for his Master.

Finally the verdict came. Crucify Peter, the Head of the Christians, on the Vatican Hill. Peter then made a request to the emperor, “Please don’t crucify me.” The emperor was flabbergasted: Is this fellow such a coward? Wasn’t he loudly preaching that there is no salvation except in Christ? Wasn’t this man zealously proclaiming that there is no name under

the sun, except that of Jesus, that has been given to us for our salvation? He said to Peter, “Peter, you are afraid to die, aren’t you?” He laughed at Peter with contempt. Peter also laughed but with rejoicing. He recollected what his Lord had said some years ago, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Mt. 10:28.) He then boldly said to the emperor, “I am not afraid to die for Christ. You can kill me any way you like, except through crucifixion. I don’t have the merit to die like him as I had denied him three times. If, however, you can’t change your decision to crucify me, do me a favour. Crucify me upside down, with my head down and my feet up.” Traditions tell us that he was crucified upside down in AD 67 on the Vatican Hill, thus adorning himself with the crown of a martyr.

“You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

“In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster and their going from us to be their destruction, but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality” (Wis 3:2-4).