

4 Easter A – Fr. Val Handwerker

May 7, 2017

Cathedral

5:00 and 10:00

Theme: Beyond the ruckus, to following in His footsteps and clinging to his cross

Through all the Sundays of the Easter Season, we're hearing from the First Letter of St. Peter. This Sunday it's set before us clearly:

“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps...When he was insulted, he returned no insult. When he suffered, he did not threaten.”

This letter was written to a church community which felt being under the thumb of oppression. Throughout Lent, in the church's night prayers, the church gave this very same passage every Sunday from St. Peter's Letter. Christ, it said, **“himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross...By his wounds you have been healed.”** I found these words tough, challenging: **“When he suffered, he did not threaten.”** They've stayed with me, and now we hear these same words this Easter Sunday.

Friends: In our own lives we have enough commotion, enough conflicts and disputes...within our families and work. And, in these days there's ruckus waging in segments of our own diocese.

Then, these words of Jesus keep coming back: **“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.”** *We're* called to follow in his footsteps. We can, instead, allow rumors to slip into gossip, attacking the character of others. It can easily harvest resentments deep within our souls.

Now, **“following in his footsteps”** doesn't mean that we're to be doormats, spineless in our convictions. Our first bishop of this new Diocese of Memphis, buried here, Bishop Carroll Dozier—inscribed above his tombs are words that he gave on the first day of this new diocese in 1971: **“What kind of church shall we be? What kind of church do you want to be?”** It's not just a rhetorical question. We're to craft what kind of church that we want to be, always praying for the prompting of the Spirit, and faithful to the lead of our bishop. There will be differing perspectives. It will mean disputes. Oh, fifteen years after Jesus' resurrection, there was a dispute which almost split the fragile church in half. It brought about the first council, a meeting of leaders in Jerusalem. The differences got so bad that two colleagues in ministry—the Apostle Paul and his partner Barnabas...well, they had to go separate ways (Acts 15:36-40). They saw things differently. There must have been hard feelings, yet they stayed as one in the

same vision: **“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.”**

Being church, following in his footsteps: It’s never neat. But it is our calling that we do it—*together*. Surely there will be storms and uneven waters.

In the middle of the Mediterranean Sea is a small Italian island named Lampedusa. It’s famous. Lampedusa has become the symbol of the global refugee crisis. It was the first place which Pope Francis visited when he left the city of Rome. Thousands of refugees and migrants make the dangerous journey in rickety boats. Many of them lose their lives in the open seas. Those who do make it to shore: they’re hoping for freedom, a new chance free of oppression. Pope Francis is a constant voice, teaching that we are to see them as neighbors.

There’s a religious sister— a Sister Paola—who works with and serves refugees on this tiny island. She greets boats which make it to shore—offering refugees welcome and fresh bread.

A professor of Notre Dame, Father Daniel Groody, tells of one arrival. The refugees were traumatized after a harrowing journey. They had not eaten for days. Sister Paola, on the path off the shore, stood on a large rock above the pathway, offering each person something to eat, as they stumbled from the boat. Sister Paola leaned forward, her cross hanging from her neck, extended over the front of her body.

One woman, staggering up the path, beaten down, instead of reaching for the bread in Sister Paola’s hand—she clutched instead the cross around Sister’s neck and clung to it in desperate hope.

Sisters and brothers: When we face rough seas in our lives, what do we reach for? (1)

“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.”

(1) See Father Daniel Groody, CSC, “Clinging to Hope,” in Give Us This Day: Daily Prayers for Today’s Catholic—May 2017 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), pp. 33-34.