

## Pastoral Reflection

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2023

I think the second reading each Sunday sometimes gets overlooked, sandwiched as it is between the first reading which draws us into the liturgy of the word, and the gospel, which usually has Jesus drawing all of our attention. But the second reading is often taken from one of the letters of the Christian scriptures, the correspondence of one of the apostles directed specifically to one (or several) of the first Christian communities, addressing their issues, problems, conflicts and questions. They're written, for the most part, to speak to specific contexts happening within the communities, not as universal proclamations meant for the whole church. Nowhere is it more important than with these letters to get at some of the context behind what is written.

Part of what we can glean from the section of today's reading attributed to Peter is the feeling of marginalization that many of the early Christian communities must have felt. Following Jesus meant dislocating themselves from both the surrounding culture and their previous religious traditions. It would have been an experience that cost them relationships upon which both their identity and their livelihoods depended. They would have found themselves marginalized and isolated, financially and emotionally unstable, displaced and unmoored. The experience of the early Christian communities in this vein raises questions for us today about how "easy" it is to call oneself a Christian when it has been defined in such a way as to fit neatly and cleanly into the culture of which we are a part. Indeed the philosopher Kierkegaard lamented that for the early Christians, to identify as followers of Christ cost them everything, including possibly their lives; while contemporary "Christians" can "follow" Christ at virtually no cost at all.

Peter's response to their sense of dislocation and instability, and the doubts which accompanied them, was to identify their sense of rejection with the rejection of the one they followed, and to recast the rejection as the beginning of something new. They were "living stones," made of the same material as the "stone which had been rejected", the one who became the "cornerstone" of a new foundation, a new building, a new home. Society's rejection of them was eclipsed by God's singling them out, "chosen and precious." The theme is consistent with what we see everywhere in scripture: a God whose ways stand in contrast to the culture in which the people find themselves, and the necessity to follow those ways even when it means to live differently than one's neighbors, friends, co-workers, family members. We are called to a new way of being, a contrary witness that "announces the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into God's wonderful light." Our very bodies, our very lives are the materials building up this new society.

—John J. Zokovitch III