

21st Sunday (A)

24th August 2014

“It didn’t make sense, but faith did”

Is 22: I place the key of the house of David on his shoulder

Ps 137: Your love O Lord is eternal, discard not the work of your hands.

Rom 11: how impossible to penetrate God’s motives ...

Mt 16:13–20: You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.

It was horrific to hear this week of the beheading of an American journalist, Jim Foley, by the militant group ISIL, after a year and three-quarters in captivity. It wasn’t his first period of incarceration, either. He had spent some 6 wks in captivity in Libya, also, 3 yrs ago. But, determined to go and report on the atrocities being committed in Syria in autumn 2012, he went back to the Middle East, despite the danger, and was captured and been detained ever since. Sold, presumably, to the terrorist/militant group ISIL, recently, his beheading served as a stark reminder of the horrors currently being meted out in some of the countries of the Middle East, caught up as they are in the turmoil of political and military struggle.

Following on from his death this week, the witness of his parents, without anger, has been exemplary; and the Pope himself has been privately in touch with them. Foley attended the Catholic (Jesuit) University in Milwaukee,

Marquette, and has spoken in the past — after his previous time in captivity — of the tremendous support that his faith, his university companions, his prayer, the Rosary, all gave him. He was able to give encouragement, too, to fellow detainees, by leading prayer together, and finding hope in faith. There is some suggestion, this weekend, that he may have offered his life in place of other Western journalists and hostages, to save them from a similar fate ... If so, it is an act of bravery and self-sacrifice that is reminiscent of what St Maximilian Kolbe did in Auschwitz in 1941.

I am sure that we are all struggling to understand the complex issues and intractable problems in the Middle East at present, and we shudder at atrocities such as the beheading of Jim Foley, or the crucifixion of opponents and indeed Christians. There seems to be no sense to it, and no humanity. In his open letter to Marquette University in autumn 2011, Jim Foley makes reference to this. He said, speaking of the support of his university friends when he was captured in Libya:

“It showed tremendous heart and was just a glimpse

of the efforts and prayers people were pouring forth. If nothing else, prayer was the glue that enabled my freedom, an inner freedom first and later the miracle of being released during a war in which the regime had no real incentive to free us. It didn't make sense, but faith did."

Christian faith, and prayer — these were the things which kept him together as a man, and as a captive; things which allowed him to remain human and humane, tolerant and forgiving, with hope for himself and for others.

Our faith is built on the Rock which is Christ, the Rock that Jesus Himself established in this world. Whatever shakes this world, whatever atrocity, cannot ultimately tear us from our moorings. We can be despondent, we can be appalled, by the evils committed ... But, as Jesus says, "the gates of the underworld shall never prevail against" the Church, for it is founded on the Rock which is Christ, Himself barbarically crucified but also risen and triumphant. This is the nature of Christian, Catholic, faith, that we take seriously the mandate of Jesus: to "turn the other cheek," to "love ones enemies and pray for those who hate you," to forgive "not seven times, but

seventy times seven." As the Church we have to live out this attitude, not paying lip-service to our forgiveness, but really living it. We can only do this if we are anchored to the Rock; we would not have the strength to do it alone, but held firm to the Rock of Peter's faith, in the Church, we can draw strength from one another. We can have the courage to forgive, and not be weighed down by dreadful regrets, jealousies and revenge. If we each behave in this strong, Christian, fashion, after the example of Christ our crucified Saviour, in all the little events of life, then when some one of us is called on to behave in this sacrificial sense in a big way, then they will have the courage to do so. It may be that most of James Foley's Jesuit-university friends will not have to give their life; but no doubt it was the prayers of them all, and his family, behind him, that buoyed him up and allowed him to witness to peace in the midst of violence. *How rich are the depths of God — how deep His wisdom and knowledge — and how impossible to penetrate His motives or understand His methods! ... To Him be glory for ever! Amen.*