

20th Sunday 2007

What a beautiful weekend! If you were up early this morning you may have seen a spectacular sunrise. This time of year it's hard to resist the beauty of creation. I hope you have had some time for yourself to appreciate and enjoy this beauty, in the mountains, seashore, or wherever your favorite places of creation are. I'm asking you to reflect for a moment on the beauty and tranquility of this earth in light of the terrible earthquake that devastated parts of Peru this past Wednesday. When you see the images of devastation, it's hard to believe that this beautiful creation could be so ferocious. (I suppose I could be preaching about the hurricane that is approaching Jamaica and I hope and pray that there will not be this kind of devastation) I'm not a geologist but I do understand that an earthquake is caused when there needs to be a release of energy in the earth's core. That the earth is searching for a restoration of "equilibrium", trying to stabilize itself. But in the process there is such destruction of life and inestimable human tragedy.

In the midst of all the stories and images of devastation, of bodies dead and alive buried amid the rubble, the one that moved me most was that of a community of believers gathered in the church of San Clemente for a celebration of the feast of the Assumption. I can not imagine the terror they must have felt in those moments when the earth shook and their world collapsed. They had come to pray, to celebrate, to give thanks to God and our Lady in this holy place. And there in that place many lost their lives. As a people who trust in the mercy of God, it's hard to understand the meaning of such a horrific experience.

I don't know exactly why I have been so moved by this tragedy. It seems that these natural disasters are coming with more and more frequency. It could be that many of us know people who have family in Peru. It could be the dramatic contrast with the beauty, the harmony, the peace that we have experienced in creation this summer. But the reason that the images of this earthquake are so striking to me is that the images of the scriptures reveal a kind of violence and turbulence as well. We hear how Jeremias was thrown into the earth, into a well that was empty of water, but filled with mud. He is sinking into the earth, unable to extricate himself. His life would have been lost if the foreigner had not been there to save him. In the psalm, we hear of the pit filled with mire and mud, the earth ready to swallow up the one who

is crying out to God for safety. And in the Gospel, it's as if Jesus were having his own earthquake. "I have come to bring fire to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but division. It seems to me that Jesus, usually so tranquil, so compassionate, so "even-tempered" wants to shake up his hearers. And what is that drives Jesus' anger. What is it that causes these feelings filled with turbulence? Jesus is consumed with passion for the kingdom of God and the will of God. He must preach against injustice and complacency. And he will suffer because of his preaching and his actions, but God will rescue him because of his faithfulness.

This Gospel is meant to "shake us up". It's meant to move us from complacency. It's meant to make us wonder what is the cost of discipleship, the cost of following Jesus. And are we willing to make that investment of ourselves? Jesus asks no more of us than he did of himself. As his disciples we can choose his way, his truth, his life.

Again, I return to the image of a people gathered together in prayer in the church on the feast of the Assumption in Pisco Peru. I wonder if they might be a symbol of faith, hope and love in the midst of a terrible human tragedy. I wonder if they might be another "great cloud of witnesses". They had chosen to be faithful to the call to follow Jesus. They were in the house of God because they believed that the way to eternal life was through Jesus. They have chosen to keep their gaze fixed on Jesus. And will we? Will we keep our gaze fixed on Jesus? Can we see with the eyes of faith and wonder if there is not hope even in the midst of tragedy. We may even see this great cloud of witnesses sharing in the Assumption of Mary, moving from this earth, from death to life.