

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2007
SIXTH SUNDAY – ORDINARY TIME

Introduction

Exactly thirty years ago on this Sunday I found myself visiting a remote village named Yanaoca in the Peruvian Andes. Since my visit spanned a weekend, the local leaders asked if I would celebrate Sunday Eucharist, as no priest had been in their village for several months.

They also told me that people from 38 surrounding pueblos came into Yanaoca each Sunday to do their buying and selling for the week. Representatives of the pueblos prepared the liturgy, a task that generally lasted some two hours. I was expected to sit in on their meeting.

At the appointed hour that Sunday morning I showed up for their planning. The readings were the same as we just heard today – from Jeremiah, Paul and Luke's Gospel. The leaders decided to concentrate on Jeremiah and the lovely vision of the righteous person who is like a tree planted near water whose leaves flourish in due season.

The problem was that a serious drought had overtaken that region of Peru. The rains had not come for months and these farming folks were in danger of losing their harvest for that year, with the possibility of food shortages, hunger and even starvation to follow. What, then, they asked was the lesson to be taken from Jeremiah and his simile of a tree planted near flowing streams?

As semi-literate Indian people, this group took a long time even to read and reread the Jeremiah passage. They took even more time to ask about its relevance for them and the ominous dry spell they were facing. As the minutes ticked by, I remember thinking to myself that they would never be able to come up with a lesson for themselves out of that Scripture reading. What was more, I had nothing to offer them. As someone who lived in Lima on the coast of Peru during that time and indeed as a foreigner in their country, I could not imagine any possible relationship between Jeremiah's verdant tree and their serious drought.

Of course I was wrong about getting something out of the Jeremiah reading. As so often happened in gatherings of poor people like that one, a little person over in one corner of the group eventually raised her hand timidly and suggested that the call of God's word that day was for them to be living water for each other. Some of us, she said, will salvage something of our harvest because we collected rain when it did fall or perhaps we had irrigation methods in place. What we salvage will have to be shared with those who lose everything.

The whole group agreed that this was the lesson from Jeremiah that day and they preached it subsequently at the liturgy (the homily done in their own language, quechua).

Theirs was obviously a real life message and not some abstract notion fabricated out of thin air; it brought tears to my eyes. They would actually share with each other from their scarcity of food.

I That dramatic story not only underscores today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, but also St. Paul's insistence on us as Resurrection people and of course the logic of Jesus' words in the Gospel we just heard: "Blessed are you poor. Yours is the Reign of God".

It is also 180 degrees from the logic of our culture.

II This week President Bush sent the f/y2008 budget to Congress. We've gotten used to the idea that a budget – national, parish or personal – is a theological statement. Jesus said it clearly: "Where your treasure is, there is your heart". So let us take a look at our national theological statement in the light of that story from the highlands of Peru.

What is proposed for f/y 2008 is:

481.4 billion dollars for "defense" (read "military personnel and hardware")

141.7 billion dollars in addition as emergency supplemental funding for Iraq, Afghanistan and anti-terrorism.

34.4 billion dollars for Homeland Security

1.8 billion dollars for border security, including the obscene fence we plan to erect between the United States and Mexico

20.2 billion dollars for the Justice Department and its anti-terrorism activities

6.4 billion dollars for the F.B.I.

At the same time the budget will be trimmed by 101 billion dollars for Medicaid and Medicare over the next five years.

And funding for the Environmental Protection Agency is decreased.

III This morning I looked at a dollar bill and a quarter. Both currencies carry the words: "In God we trust". But that's false. We don't trust in God but in our military strength for protection. We talk the talk; but we don't walk the walk.

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IV In a few moments we shall hear again about the Bishop's Lenten Appeal – another theological statement – asking our contributions for some very worthy causes: Catholic Charities, Hispanic ministries, for example.

However, the Bishop's message never makes the comparison between what he is asking and this blasphemous national budget. One more missed opportunity to highlight true priorities from sinful ones.

The silence of our hierarchy – and indeed our "lowerarchy", our pulpits – on these matters is deafening. The bishops will have to answer for their silence – and so will we.

Conclusion: Sixty-five years ago the churches by and large remained silent in the face of the Nazi horrors. I wonder if sixty-five years from now history will equally condemn us.

Still, during the Nazi regime there was what was called the “Confessing Church”, pastors and people who did speak out in opposition to that sinful social situation. My prayer today is that we, each of us, Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish and many, many other people of good will may find our voices and become that “Confessing Church” in this time of history.