

21st Sunday in O.T. 2020

The State of California lies along that geological feature known as the San Andreas Fault, and as a result it experiences earthquakes from time-to-time. The novelist, Mark Twain, of Huckleberry Finn fame, gives a vivid account of his experience of being caught in the devastating San Francisco earthquake of 1865; He writes, “there came a terrific shock; the ground seemed to roll under me in waves, interrupted by a violent joggling up and down, and there was a heavy grinding noise as of brick houses rubbing together..... I reeled about on the pavement trying to keep my footing...”

We are blessed as it is unlikely that, in this part of the world, we will ever have to endure the violent shaking of the earth beneath our very feet. But that said, few of us will go through life without experiencing occasions when certain distressing events will shake us to the very core of our being; for example, a sudden bereavement; an unexpected betrayal; a frightening medical diagnosis.

We know that specialist construction engineers can design buildings with solid and deep foundations that can withstand the effects of earthquakes. Jesus, using the example of the well-constructed house, says, “*Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house, and it did not fall: it was founded on rock.*” He is reminding us of an obvious truth - we need a firm foundation if we are to withstand the “earthquakes” which are part-and-parcel of life.

The Psalms, even when all in life reels and is shaken to the very foundations, continue to proclaim, “*My God is the rock where I take refuge; my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.*” (Ps.17:3) But the Psalms always have a particular image in mind when they speak of the “rock”. It is a physical place, a rocky outcrop in the centre of Jerusalem on which the Temple stood – today we know it as The Dome of the Rock. The Temple was regarded by the Jews as the meeting place of heaven and earth; here they encountered God - it was, for them, the rock-sure centre of the world. Jesus, however, radically re-interprets this thinking. By a simple question, Jesus shifts “the rock-sure centre of the world” from a place to a person. He asks, “*Who do you say I am?*” Simon Peter responded, “*You are the Christ.*” Jesus, in turn, declares, “*You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.*” Simon Peter's faith in Jesus as

the Christ is the rock, a sure foundation. We are familiar with how the faith of Simon Peter was shaken again and again; shaken by his betrayal of Jesus; shaken by the crucifixion of Jesus; shaken by the persecution of the Church and by his own arrest and crucifixion. But like a well constructed building designed to withstand the effects of an earthquake, his faith moved and swayed, but did not collapse.

In our uncertain, and often cynical and dismissive, times, the person of Peter brings us face to face with an important truth. Peter was a man with a big personality, warm but impetuous. He was loved by Jesus, and obviously loved and admired by his fellow apostles and disciples. He was chosen by Jesus, not because he was flawless, but because he was big-hearted. There are those who will only accept the Church if that same Church is perfect and her leaders are free from failure. But such a Church does not exist on this earth; what we are is a community striving to become saints – and we must always remember that saints are forgiven sinners! Humility, the striving for perfection, and forgiveness, are hallmarks of this community of Jesus Christ. Peter's big-hearted faith was to be the inspiration for all in the Church; Jesus said to him, “*when you have recovered strengthen the others*”. God grant our Church leaders the same big-hearted faith.

As we hear the Gospel of this Sunday we are not just listening to an episode from the life of St. Peter. We are reminded that each of us is a living stone, a piece of the living rock, which builds up the Church. In spite of our human frailty and failures Jesus has chosen us to be his disciples. He turns to us and puts this question to each one of us: “*Who do you say I am?*” His question does not seek an abstract answer, but one from the heart, based on a trusting friendship and a deep love. Jesus' question is life's most crucial question - our answer speaks of our faith. Is my faith one that will withstand the challenge of life's earthquakes?

At difficult times in the Church's life, such as we are experiencing at this time, the Gospel encourages us, not to overlook difficulties or to ignore the human defects of the Church, but to deepen our personal faith in Jesus Christ, and to pray that the faith of the Church in God's power may grow ever stronger. The only strength of the Church must be faith in the power of God. It is this faith which ensures that “*the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it.*”

*“God is for us a refuge and strength,
a helper close at hand, in time of distress:
so we shall not fear though the earth should rock,
though the mountains fall into the depths of the sea....
The Lord is with us: God is our stronghold....”* (cf Ps. 45)
Amen.