

Trinity 10 (Proper 14)

1 Kings 19.4-8 / Ephesians 4.25 - 5.2 / John 6.35, 41-51

For the past few weeks I have been in Peru. We went primarily for the ordination of three new bishops. But going so far, it seemed silly not to take some holiday as well, and like for everyone else in Peru for the first time, the must-see site was Machu Picchu. This is a 600 year old fortress-cum-palace-cum-temple built by the Incas high in the Andes and surrounded by carefully constructed terraces for growing vegetable including the 3,000 varieties of potato native to Peru.

Machu Picchu almost but not quite exceeded all our expectations. I say almost, because before getting there we had travelled along the so-called Sacred Valley and visited several other Incan sites. Although the dramatic geographical setting of Machu Picchu is spectacular and unique, we had already been introduced to the wonders of Incan architecture and engineering, and especially the way in which whole mountain sides were converted into cascading terraces and even more particularly the amazing way in which without any modern scientific tools or means of measurement, massive boulders were cut to size and transported from quarries often several miles away and fitted perfectly into place.

Anyway, enough of travellers' tales - you can see the photos if you like! The relevance of all this to this morning's liturgy lies in one particular feature of the architecture.

Little remains of the housing of the common people, because they were built of mud bricks, adobe, always vulnerable to rain, to wind and to earthquakes. Even those that were made of stone were very roughly put together.

By contrast, the palaces and temples were made of the hardest possible rock, and being neatly and ingeniously finished, have withstood all the ravages of time.

It's not difficult to understand the difference. In every human society there has been - and is -- a similar difference between the living conditions of the rich and the poor.

But for the Incas more was at stake here than the division of society into different classes.

The kings and the priests were regarded as being themselves divine, and representing on earth the permanence of heaven. Kings and priests were for the Incas (and the word Inca actually means "king" or "royal family") a symbol of what will be forever. The mass of the population on the other hand represented what was impermanent, provisional, and temporary.

Forget for a moment the revulsion you feel, or at least I hope you feel, at this social system and what it suggests about the different value accorded to different human beings.

Listen instead to what it implies about the importance of building to last when it is a matter of reflecting the eternal in the world of time.

Listen now to some words of St Peter: *"Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."*

And again, *"you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."*

For us as Christians, all human beings possess the same eternal and divine dignity. Everyone is called to eternal life, and to become a royal priesthood. Living stones, making a living temple. Try to think quite realistically about that image. No place here for mud houses for some, stone palaces for others.

Those old Incas built for permanence; we build for something more than permanence, we build for eternity.

This is a real challenge for Christians in every generation. It is all too easy to look on faith as a kind of support for earthly life. For many people religion might be a temporary comfort, but it is a long way from the teaching of Jesus who came to proclaim the kingdom of God and who built his Church on the solid foundation of the apostles.

As we heard from St Peter, this spiritual house is made of something even more durable than rock; it is made of living stones, which is why it also shares many of the features of a body. St Paul wrote that *"we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love."* (Eph. 4.16)

Living stones, like bodies, need nourishment. In today's gospel, Jesus said, *"I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* (Jn. 4.51) He is talking about the Eucharist of course, this wonderful meal which anticipates the time when, as St Luke puts it, people *"will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God."* (Lk 13.29)

This is food for our journey, one of the aspects for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer, *Give us this day our daily bread.* Of course we ask for what sustains our life on earth, but far more we ask for what will enable our life on earth to be a foretaste of and prepare us for eternal life. If people accuse you of "being too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use", just remember that it is because we believe in heaven that we believe that life on earth matters so much. Remember, too, that Jesus himself told people to love the Lord their God with all their heart and mind and strength, and their neighbour as themselves. In other words in order to love our fellow human beings as they should be loved - as people whose dignity is eternal - it is necessary to love God first.

Mud bricks, hard rock or building for eternity. No contest really!