



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



April 6, 2011 Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Reading 1 Is 49:8-15

Thus says the LORD:
In a time of favor I answer you,
on the day of salvation I help you;
and I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,
To restore the land and allot the desolate heritages,
Saying to the prisoners: Come out!
To those in darkness: Show yourselves!
Along the ways they shall find pasture,
on every bare height shall their pastures be.
They shall not hunger or thirst,
nor shall the scorching wind or the sun strike them;
For he who pities them leads them
and guides them beside springs of water.
I will cut a road through all my mountains,
and make my highways level.
See, some shall come from afar,
others from the north and the west,
and some from the land of Syene.
Sing out, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth,
break forth into song, you mountains.
For the LORD comforts his people
and shows mercy to his afflicted.

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me;
my Lord has forgotten me."
Can a mother forget her infant,
be without tenderness for the child of her womb?
Even should she forget, I will never forget you.

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In this reading Isaiah speaks of a new landscape being created.

This would have sounded miraculous to his listeners and contemporaries.

But to us, it is the norm in our technological society.

We cut down mountains to build roads or extract minerals; we dig canals to link oceans, rivers. We transform deserts into productive agricultural land.

This morning I want to talk about my experience and impressions in seeing a transformed land, that is China.

For half of my life, China was the enemy. The Peoples Republic of China was instituted in 1949, a year before I was born.

A few months after I was born the Korean War began; when China entered that war on the side of North Korea a bloodbath began, that ended in a stalemate that persists until today. It was the first war America did not win.

As a child I was told to eat all the food on my plate, because there were starving people in China.

During the wars of liberation in the 50's and 60's a blizzard of hateful, sabre-rattling messages came out of China directed at us.

China overran Tibet and invaded and seized a part of India.

During the presidential election campaign of 1960, the biggest topic of the Kennedy and Nixon debates was our defense of Nationalist China and should we go to war over two tiny islands off the coast of the mainland that Red China was shelling.

The pictures we saw of China showed a drab existence in which the bicycle was only form of personal transportation in the cities.

When high schools and universities were closed in the cultural revolution, we heard horror stories of chaos and anarchy that made the student unrest in the west seem like kindergarten games in comparison.

Then Nixon went China. Believe it or not, there is an opera by that name. And things changed. The Chinese came to Washington and shopped for a building to buy to use as their embassy. They looked at my hotel but bought the one one block away.

Then there was the Tienamen Square upheaval in 1989, in which students were killed and many imprisoned.



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And then there was the China Mrs. Sams and I visited during Spring break.

For five years I lived in New York City. Beijing is what New York used to be. Beijing has smog, as New York & LA does. Just west of Beijing, within the bends of the Yellow River, is an area of desert and the strong spring winds blowing into Beijing become sandstorms.

Ten years ago the WTC in NY was destroyed; it has not been replaced or rebuilt. That says something.

The construction crane is now the national bird of China. That says something too. It is a country alive, vibrant, confident and growing, growing rapidly.

It is a rich country, with many banks, innovative architecture, magnificently efficient highways and high speed rail-lines.

It's people save money. It is the largest creditor of the United States.

There were few bicycles, but each month 1,000 new cars are purchased and take to the road in Beijing. The most common car we saw was the Audi.

A person can drive their car only 4 out the 5 workdays per week. The traffic is heavier than heavy. Driving is an adventure, rather like a game of chicken played by cars, pedestrians, bicyclists and busses all together. Horns and lights are used to intimidate competing drivers. Lanes are mere suggestions and brakes seldom used.

We did not see litter or trash on the streets or sidewalks. The parking garages were spotlessly clean. There is a high degree of environmental consciousness.

We did not see a lot of police or police cars. Those we did were around the foreign embassies and at the entrance to Tienamen Square.

We did not see any starving people in China, although there surely are some. After all, there are starving people in the U.S. too.

There are a lot of busy restaurants filled with families, and as Mrs Sams & I can testify, LOTS of food.

The stores are full of well made goods and supermarkets full of food, strange as some of it is. We did try Green Tea Ice Cream. A bookstore near our hotel would have made Barnes & Noble in New York proud.



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The people are friendly and polite. We flew on 3 different Chinese airlines within China, and they were better experiences than we had on the US carrier that brought us to China and took us home. Our worst experience on the whole trip was the reception back into the US at Newark airport.

I was most surprised by the religious devotion shown at both the Buddhist monastery and at the Church we went to. Both were crowded. There were seats set up outside the church in the courtyard for the overflow. The Catholic church has four masses on Sunday. The priest, who was a classmate of Fr Dominic at St John's University, reported that last year at the Easter vigil, 2,500 people were baptized in the diocese. One local secretary of the communist party reported that her mother and all her sisters were Christians, and that she would probably convert after she retired.

There are lots of young people in China, even with the one child policy (which is being revised, by the way.) We visited 5 high schools. Luhe in Beijing was the smallest. The schools in Changchun, in Manchuria and Huhot, in Inner Mongolia, had 7,000 students. The schools, relatively new, had extensive campuses & each one had an observatory for astronomy. Their classrooms sat 60 to 80 students, who were hardworking and attentive. They know that education and hard work are the keys to their future.

They do feel stress, however, and wonder of if you do too.

These students are eager to know all about you, and what you think of China. They wanted to know which education system we thought was best – the US system or China's. They are critical of their own system, very constructively however. They are eager to come to the US to visit or study; and there are millions of them.

It's a good thing some of you are learning their language. Although they say it's their most difficult subject, they are all learning your language.

In the world you are growing up into, these young people will either be your partners or your adversaries. Our two countries will either be friends or foes. It will be better for us all and the world if we be friends. And friendship starts between people, one on one.

The faculty of Luhe International Center presented us with an original work of calligraphy done by one of the faculty members. The message of the work is from the writings of Confucius, the founder of the Chinese educational and civil service systems. It reads " Friends come to visit us from afar; isn't this a cause for happiness ?" The people and students of China want to be our friends.

There is much to learn from each other. Religion and church are concepts harmonious with Chinese culture, in which the people are used to living and working as a group, and so their society is accomplishing a great deal.



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We are rugged individualists in a culture in which the individual sinks or swims. So individuals accomplish a great deal while society suffers.

Our relationship with the schools and people of China provides an opportunity for friendship and growth for both of us. I hope you take advantage of them. These relationships demonstrate the wideness of God's kingdom.

So let us stand and pray for the coming of that kingdom as Jesus taught us.