

Sackcloth and ashes

John Dear | Aug. 16, 2006 On the Road to Peace

The high desert of New Mexico, where I live, is one of the most beautiful places in the country, with its red mesas, fields of sagebrush, Sangre de Cristo mountains and endless turquoise sky. Recently, I visited Bandelier National Park, where the Anasazi Native Americans lived from the 1100s until the 1500s, hidden away in a spectacular canyon surrounded by high brown cliffs. They shared everything in common, cared for their children, and lived together in peace. Each day they ascended the highest cliff into a large niche and there worshipped the Creator. While St. Francis strived to teach nonviolence in Europe, these holy people had cobbled together a community of nonviolence already. The people are long gone. But their peaceful spirit remains. One comes away knowing you've been to a genuine place of peace.

But today on the top of that same mountain, beyond the canyon, lays a dark contrast -- Los Alamos, the most destructive place in the world. Birthplace of the bomb, where business is booming, where a new generation of nuclear weapons, against international treaties, is in the works.

On Aug. 5 and 6, hundreds gathered, the first day in Santa Fe and the next in Los Alamos, to commemorate two coinciding events: to celebrate the Transfiguration and to mourn the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. The Feast of the Transfiguration celebrates the day when Jesus exploded with the spiritual power of nonviolence, bringing humanity light and peace and the fullness of love. The dropping of the atomic bomb Aug. 6, 1945, on the other hand, vaporized 140,000 people in a flash. Three days later, we did it again in Nagasaki. The bombings were a complete and utter renunciation of the words uttered from the cloud of the Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Dorothy Day called the atomic explosions "the anti-transfiguration." A demonic light had been made, nonviolence rejected, and humanity's future all but foreclosed. We had consigned ourselves to limp along under the cloud of the bomb.

In Santa Fe Aug. 5, several hundred people attended a Mass for peace and heard the Transfiguration story. "My beloved Son? listen to him." And we recalled what Jesus had to say. "Love one another; love your neighbor; forgive one another; be as compassionate as God; seek first God's reign and God's justice; do unto others as you would have them do unto you; put down the sword. Love your enemies."

That evening, nearly 500 people joined us to hear Kathy Kelly, a co-founder of Voices for Creative Nonviolence who campaigned against U.S. sanctions against Iraq and has made some 20 trips there, speak about her missions of peace to Iraq and urge the need to resist the war. Then on Aug. 6, we ascended Los Alamos in the spirit of resistance. Now with a different story -- the story of Jonah, who urged upon the people of Nineveh to repent, a message, against the odds, the people took to heart. Like them we donned sackcloth, sat in ashes and repented of the mortal sin of war and nuclear weapons. There in the heart of town, along Trinity and Oppenheimer Roads, we renounced our violence, our complicity. And we opened our hearts to God's gift of peace.

The symbols converged and enlightened. The ashes reminded us of the ash of Hiroshima. Jonah reminded us of the ancient city of Nineveh, today known as Mosul, Iraq, a land the U.S. shattered and poisoned with depleted uranium.

Ours was the fourth observance of Hiroshima Day at Los Alamos. The media granted it some attention. Church officials balk at our politically charged prayer. Even the government has noticed. New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson met with us earlier in the year to discuss our demand for disarmament.

Such a strange way to pass a Sunday afternoon -- itching in sackcloth, dusty with ashes, anti-war signs in our hands. And this in a town of thousands of intellectuals busy at making weapons of mass destruction and getting paid handsomely for their troubles. The contrast boggles the mind.

I sat silently along Trinity road with the others, trying to stay mindful, to enter the spirit of the moment. And in silence I apologized to God for the violence I've committed -- against myself, my friends and relatives, my fellow church people. I apologized for doing too little to disarm violence. I apologized for loving none too well my sisters and brothers around the world. It was a humbling experience, but one offering a consolation of sorts. Repentance brings inner peace.

We did what we could. Offered our prayers, pledged to keep at it, and said our piece: Our government's weapons are immoral, unjust, impractical, illegal, criminal, idolatrous, sinful, and demonic. They don't protect us; they don't make us safer. They are the ultimate form of terrorism. They are blasphemous before the Creator. And they are larcenous. The billions spent on them rob the world's poor.

We also had a thing or two to say to the good people of the town. Quit your jobs and be converted to the nonviolent Christ. You cannot serve the God of peace and the false gods of war. You can't love your enemies as you design the means to vaporize them. You cannot follow the nonviolent Jesus and maintain a nuclear arsenal.

One wonders if they heard. But such is never the cardinal issue. The true efficacy of the weekend lay in our own broken hearts. Urged by one another, consoled in the silence, we pledged anew to take Jesus at his word. We resolved to follow him on the road to peace and practice his way of creative nonviolence. To go so far as the cross in the hopes of a transfigured world, a world without war, poverty or nuclear weapons. Such a world as the Anasazi people created long ago.

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