

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 23, 2007 | The Peace Pulpit

This third part of our instruction from sacred scripture today continues our reading of the Holy Gospel according to Luke. Again, I remind you that a few Sundays ago, we began the part of Luke's Gospel where he describes Jesus beginning his final journey to Jerusalem. Along the way then, on the last few Sundays, we've heard of Jesus preaching and teaching, working miracles. Now we come to a point where we discover how difficult this journey is for Jesus.

Jesus began this last journey of his life to Jerusalem, where he anticipated that he would be handed over to his enemies, tortured in a horrible way and then executed as a criminal. So far, as we've been following this journey and in a sense, spiritually walking with Jesus toward Jerusalem, we've watched Jesus heal, we've watched Jesus reach out to the poor, the marginalized, those who are rejected by society.

We've listened to Jesus teach us through parables, and everything seems to be going along just fine and we're very happy, I think, most of us, to say, "Yes, I can go to Jerusalem with Jesus." But now we come to this point where we discover - and I think we're not used to this - that Jesus has great trouble. He becomes very emotional about that's going to happen to him. He's afraid. He wants to turn back, because he sees what's happening.

He says, "Look, division! I wanted to bring peace but it's not happening because I've been speaking the truth, challenging people, even against the religious authorities, against the civil authorities. Some will follow, but others don't." So there's division. You know, it happened even in his own family. He wasn't just speaking out of the blue when he said "mother against daughter and daughter against mother and father against son" and so on.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, the first time he went to preach at Nazareth and he stood up in the synagogue and proclaimed that beautiful passage from Isaiah about "God has anointed me, sent me to proclaim the good news about the reign of God," but how things have to be radically changed. He said, "I'm the one who came to bring that change, to bring justice to the poor, to set the downtrodden free, to reach out to the sick and the rejected."

But do you know what happened then? You would think everybody would welcome this message, but instead - now this is in his own home town where he grew up. Members of his extended family would have been present in that synagogue - certainly his neighbors were - and they wanted to kill him! They took him out of the synagogue to the brow of the hill and were going to throw him down and kill him. He was trying to preach a message of peace, but the result is division, even hatred.

It isn't easy to follow Jesus, to be proclaimers of his message, because many will reject him, even, as Jesus found, within his own family, in his own community, among his own religious believers. As Jesus realized how

much controversy he was causing and how many people were bitterly angry and hated him, he knew more deeply what was going to happen. Today, he speaks about "this anguish I feel," anguish, "because I have this baptism," and by that, he's talking about his death, of descending into death, like descending into the waters of baptism.

That's what's going to happen to him. He says, "I'm filled with anguish." It reminds you of the part of St. John's gospel in the 12th chapter where Jesus is thinking about his death and tells that beautiful little parable about the seed falling into the ground and it has to die so it can bring forth new life, break forth into new life, and it sounds so life-giving and seems like it would bring you confidence, but Jesus was trying to reassure himself because a moment later he says, "I'm filled with anguish! What shall I say, 'God, deliver me from this hour'?"

But no, "This is why I have come." And so Jesus accepts - as this moment is recorded in John's gospel, in today's gospel, he accepts, "This is the baptism with which I must be baptized. I only want it to happen," he says, so he accepts God's will. He goes forward in that journey, ready to go to Jerusalem, face the hatred and the violence, and finally be killed. But now, of course, as we've been following this journey with Jesus, we come to the same point.

Are we going to go on with him or turn back? Are we going to continue to proclaim his message of truth for our world, a message that will cause controversy? How we wish it would bring peace [as] Jesus did. He wanted that peace to happen, that everyone would accept it and everyone would love one another and everyone would be at peace with one another, but the truth divides, so we have to ask ourselves a question.

It's hard. I think most of us, as we've lived our lives as Catholics and Christians, we've thought, "Well, religion is supposed to bring comfort to us, enable us to be always joyful and peaceful," and now suddenly we're being told, "No, that's not the way it is." If you follow Jesus, you're going to walk into hatred, and people may want to kill you even. It's so significant, I think, that our first lesson today from this book of the prophet Jeremiah, is a lesson about God's chosen people being threatened with war and violence.

Isn't there special significance in the fact that that threat was coming from Babylon, which is today the country of Iraq, where we're engaged in war? We had prophets like [Pope] John Paul II who said that war is wrong, don't do it. [Pope] Benedict [XVI] has repeated the same message. The Catholic bishops in the United States have made the same judgment, and yet like those people in Jeremiah's time, those in positions of power were determined to go forward into war, and they did.

Jeremiah, because he was preaching against it - and notice the terms, because I've heard these same terms used today. "Oh, don't speak against the war. It's too hurtful to our troops who are over there." That's what they accused Jeremiah of: "You're causing a morale problem," so, "Get rid of him. Throw him into a cistern where he's going to starve to death." I've noticed too - we're already into a presidential campaign although it's over a year from the time we vote - but recently one of the candidates said, "I'll negotiate with even those that we think of as our enemies."

Almost immediately the other candidate said, "No, you can't do that. You have to be strong. You've got to be ready to go to war." Why can't we hear the message of Jeremiah? He was preaching, speaking for God. Why

can't we hear that message? Really it's the message of Jesus too. He rejected violence. He went to his death loving his enemies.

Today is a turning point in the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, and again I suggest, a turning point for us. So we have to pray deeply that we can really hear God's word. We have to try to listen deeply in our spirit and in our heart to God speaking to us through Jesus, through Jeremiah, through the scriptures. We have to make our choice: Will we continue to go on to Jerusalem with Jesus or turn away?

Our second lesson today offers us a very encouraging word, encouraging us to yes, follow Jesus, keep going along his way, because as we heard in that lesson: "What a cloud of innumerable witnesses surround us" [This is] the many other people of faith who have followed Jesus, who are following Jesus today, that whole cloud of witnesses and especially Jesus. Let us look to Jesus, the founder of our faith, who will bring it completion.

"For the sake of the joy reserved for him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and now sits at the right hand of God." Think of Jesus who suffered so many contradictions from evil people, and you will not be discouraged or grow weary. Keep your eyes on Jesus and you will have the courage to follow him and to follow his way that ultimately will bring us the fullness of God's reign and the fullness of God's peace.

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