NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 25, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

This evening, I think it's very important for us to try to listen to this word of God, this inspired message that Paul speaks about as something we need to cherish, hear and listen to. We must try to listen within the context of what is happening in our lives.

Tonight, we do it within the context of the meeting for which we're gathered in Pax Christi Florida. I hope, especially within the context of what I was suggesting to us this afternoon, is our work for coming here, on into this 21st century. Within the context of following up the words of Pope John Paul II, "Never again war. No, never again war." Within the context of those words that John Paul spoke so vehemently and Paul VI spoke before him, the same words, passionately.

Within the context of those words and setting a goal for ourselves of saying no to war, we listen to the scriptures tonight. But also another very important event that is going to happen this week, next Friday, Oct. 26, a peasant from Austria will be beatified, proclaimed as one who we can and should venerate and imitate, Franz Jägerstatter, the Austrian peasant who, on Aug. 9, 1943, was executed, put to death, because he refused to wage war, in this case, Hitler's war. He said no to war and he paid a heavy price.

So when we listen to the scriptures tonight, we might, first of all, be disconcerted, I think, by the first lesson. We hear about the chosen people traveling through the desert and engaging in war, the very thing that we're being told we must say no to. It almost sounds as though somehow war is being supported by the word of God, but there are a couple of things that we should reflect on as we listen to that passage.

First of all, it's always true about the scriptures. There's a saying: "We don't listen to the scriptures because they tell us how the heavens go, but rather because they tell us how to go to heaven," which is a way of telling us that we don't look for scientific facts in the scriptures. God was not trying to teach us science through the scriptures, so we don't really think, as the scriptures tell us, that the world was created in seven days, of course not; it's been billions of years.

Historically, we don't understand everything that's told to us in the scriptures as something that we should imitate. But what we do try to do is to listen to every incident that is described for us, as tonight's incident from the book of Exodus is, and ask: What's the spiritual message? What's the word of God that we need to listen to? In fact, I think if we listen deeply tonight to that passage, we discover that it's a passage that's telling us: Don't trust in war, don't trust in human power. We must trust in God.

Isn't that what Moses is showing the people? It's not their might and power and so on that enabled them to move on through the desert, free of their slavery in Egypt and heading toward the promised land. It's because they're traveling with God with them. More and more, they have to try to discover this. God is only revealed to them gradually.

There are many things in the Hebrew scriptures that might surprise us about how little the chosen people had come to understand God, really. In all of the Old Testament, until you get right toward the end of the period before Jesus, the Jewish people had no concept of an afterlife. They did not know of this God who is a God forever, that will draw them into the fullness of God's light, so they're learning as they're going along.

Yes, they did engage in war, but that doesn't mean that God is supporting war. No, the lesson there is to trust in God. And if we are going to say no to war now, just think about it, how much we must really become people of faith. If we're going to try to follow Jesus, who rejected violence, rejected war, we must be people who are deeply believing and ready to trust in God and God alone -- not in human power, not in arms, not in wealth. No, we have to come to trust in God.

Now we turn to the gospel lesson, and again, within the framework of what we're gathered for, I think if we listen deeply, this lesson too reminds us of a very important truth, and that truth, I think, is that Jesus came, even as he himself proclaimed -- if you go to the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel, you find Jesus when he preaches for the first time in his hometown, drawing from the text which he picked: "The spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind sight, to set the downtrodden free, proclaim God's year of favor. This is why I've come," to make justice happen. That's why Jesus came.

So this passage tonight is reminding us that as we help to transform our world into the reign of God, justice will happen. That's what the woman in the gospel is seeking -- justice. No one knows exactly what her case was about, but some scripture commentators suggested that perhaps because she's a widow, maybe her former husband's family is refusing to give back the dowry, which she has a right to, so she's persistent, going back to that unjust judge, until finally he relents.

But it's not only about making justice happen. This passage also reminds us of something that you'll be challenged by. When we try to say no to war, many people understand that as being passive, as giving up on the presence of injustice, as letting evil triumph, letting evil have the upper hand, but that is not what it means. When we commit ourselves to give up war, to give up violence, we're not committing ourselves to be passive in the face of evil.

This woman was not passive. She came back day after day after day against extraordinary odds until justice was done. The same thing has to be true of us. No, we're not giving up war so we can be passive and let evil triumph in our world. We give up war because we know there's a more clear, effective way to make peace happen -- the way of Jesus, the way of love -- and we try to follow that way with persistence and determination.

We're very active in the effort to resist evil, to transform evil situations into situations of love, to turn hatred into love, to respond to evil with good. We are active as we reject war. We become very active in trying to build a world of justice that will lead to a world of peace. We're very active in resisting injustice, resisting tyranny, resisting evil in whatever phase we see it.

Of course, as we celebrate this week, and I'm sure all of us will, the life and the witness of Franz Jägerstatter, we find these lessons from tonight's gospel being implemented by that peasant from Austria, who stood up against extraordinary odds, and who was willing to pay an extraordinary price. If you don't know the story of Franz Jägerstatter, it's important that you find out about it, and I can share just a bit of it tonight.

He was in his early 30s when he was finally called up to be conscripted into Hitler's armies. As a peasant farmer, he was not called at first because they needed farmers to produce the food for the nation and for the army, but then as the war turned against the Nazis and they began to be defeated in Russia, North Africa and so on, in late 1942, the command came for Franz to be conscripted into the army.

Now he had already spoken out very strongly against Hitler and Hitler's ideology because he was the one person in his tiny village of St. Radegund in Austria, who voted against the joining together of Austria and Germany that Hitler was insisting upon. That was back in 1938. Franz was known as someone who was speaking out against Hitler and Hitler's ideology, so it was not a surprise to the people that he was going to say no, but they tried to talk him out of it.

They resented the fact that he was showing what, in fact, all of them should have been doing. Many, in fact the parish priest and the bishop of the diocese, tried to convince Franz, "Wait, you must go. You must serve your country like all the others are doing. Besides, you have three children and a wife. If you don't go, they will kill you." They tried to convince him that he had to go, but Franz continued to say no.

So he was taken off to prison, first to the city of Linz and then over to Berlin, and then on Aug. 9, 1943, he was beheaded, a true witness to faith, one who rejected war, who rejected violence, and who, like St. Paul tells Timothy, was willing when it's convenient or inconvenient, when it's dangerous or not dangerous, when it seems sensible or not sensible, "You must follow the way of Jesus," so Franz did.

I've been blessed and I recognize this because I've had the opportunity to visit that village of St. Radegund on a number of occasions. I've come to know Franz's widow, who is still living, Franziska Jägerstatter. She's 92 years old now, but very vigorous and she'll be at the beatification next Friday, together with the three daughters, spouses, grandchildren.

Imagine the emotional experience that that will be, I think, especially for Franziska, because at first, she was among those who were trying to tell Franz, "No, for the sake of your family, don't do it. Don't resist Hitler like that." But then she was persuaded and she fully committed herself to what he was going to do. Then she lived on, taking care of the farm, providing for the children as they grew up. She was heroic and is still a very heroic person.

One time when I was visiting there, she got out a scrapbook with photographs in it. I think this will give us a sense of how hard it had to be for her and for Franz. She had taken a picture of the three children, who at that point in 1943 were around 6, 4 and 2 years old. The three children are standing there with a sign on which is written three words: "Father, come quickly." They were begging their father to come home.

She showed that picture to Franz when she visited him in the prison in Berlin. How it must have torn his heart to have to say no to his children on that occasion, but he was saying yes to his children in a much more important way, by living and witnessing to the truth of Jesus in spite of the cost. Now, Franz will be honored by our church and we will look to him as one who is a model for our time.

Franz said no to Hitler's war, but in this time, at this point in history, because war has become total war, we must say no to war, and I think the lessons tonight help to reinforce this, and Franz's example reinforces it. Again, St. Paul encourages us to be faithful to the scriptures, whether it's convenient or inconvenient, whether it's safe or not safe, whether it seems sensible or not sensible. Live the scriptures, follow the way of Jesus, follow the way of love, which is the only way to bring true peace into our world.

[**Editor's Note:** Bishop Gumbleton preached at St Augustine Church in Gainesville, Fla., as part of the Florida Pax Christi State Assembly.
From Oct. 26 to Nov. 1, Gumbleton will be attending the beatification ceremonies for Franz Jägerstaetter in Austria. Watch NCR for coverage of this historic event.]

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