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

First Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 6, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

As we are all aware, Advent is the season of hope as we prepare to celebrate once more the coming of Jesus at the time of his birth. When something has already happened historically, it's hard to look forward to it again. However, as we know, Jesus came into our human history 2,000 years ago to bring about a transformation of our world, to bring about the reign of God as he announced at the beginning of his public life, "The reign of God is at hand."

So we not only are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus as it happened historically 2,000 years ago, but we look forward even more, with greater anticipation and with greater hope, to that coming of the full reign of God into our midst.

Our first lesson today describes, in a very extraordinary way, what that reign of God will be like when the prophet Isaiah pronounces what he calls "The vision of Isaiah, son of Amos, concerning Judah and Jerusalem." Then he goes on to tell us, "In those last days, the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be set over the highest mountains and shall tower over the hills." And then there's a very beautiful scene when he describes how "all the nations will stream to that place. They will come saying, 'Let us go to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may teach us God's ways and we may follow God's paths.'"

Then even more dramatically, "God will rule over the nations and settle disputes for many peoples." You can see all the nations streaming to this place of God and "they will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks." In other words, they will end war. There will be no more war. "Nation will not raise the sword against nation, they will train for war no more."

What Pope John Paul II said so dramatically at the time of the first Persian Gulf War when he published an encyclical letter on the 100th anniversary of our Catholic social teaching [was]: "I myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf, repeated the cry, 'Never again war, no, never again war!'" and he went on to describe why we have to make that happen.

That's what's being promised here in this passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah, that there will never be, again, war. We will live in a time of the fullness of peace, the reign of God, so the prophet pleads with us, "Come, let us go in the light of God." End war. Make the reign of God happen, a time of fullness of peace, fullness of life, fullness of justice.

Now that vision might seem impossible, and it can't be brought about simply by our human efforts. God is making it happen and will make it happen. We get a hint of how God can make this happen if we listen carefully

to the first part of that vision of Isaiah when he tells us "The mountain of Yahweh's house," what we call the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the hill called Zion, where the temple was built, "shall be set higher than the highest mountains and shall tower over the hills."

Well, that place in Jerusalem that we call Temple Mount is a hill -- it's rather high. When you're on the top of Temple Mount and you look around, you see many other hills that are much higher, mountains in the background, so for this hill to be raised up, there has to be radical change. God will make it happen. That hill will be raised up so that it's higher than all the mountains. It's the work of God. Isaiah is telling us that just as that will happen because God can and will make it happen, so to all nations will come streaming to this mountain set above all the mountains.

And the reign of God happens because God can bring it about. We can change and we must change. What that means, radically, is what Paul speaks to the church at Rome, where he tells them, after exhorting them, to leave the evil ways of their past, to do something new, something radically different. Put on the Lord, Jesus; listen to Jesus; follow Jesus.

Or as I reminded us last night, when Paul wrote to the church at Philippi even more dramatically, "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, who though he was God, did not think equality to God was something to be clung to, but emptied himself so that he could enter into human history, become one like us, become fully human, giving himself even over to the tragedy of death, and even the ignominious death of the cross."

Have that mind, that heart of Jesus, that way of Jesus. If we listen to these words called to the Romans and to Philippi, we begin to understand how radically we have to change to have the mind of Jesus, to have a willingness, as Jesus did, to accept suffering. He gave himself over to the cross; accept suffering rather than inflict suffering, a willingness to be killed rather than to kill. He did accept the ignominious death on the cross. He was executed. He allowed himself to be killed, rather than to kill.

It was the way of Jesus to reject violence of any kind whatsoever, and how much each of us has to change. Each of us only knows in our own heart how radically I have to change in order to be like Jesus, especially in this way of non-violence so that we would say, "No to war, never again war." Are we really ready to do that? So far, at least since the first few centuries of the church's presence in the world, we as a church have not been totally committed to this way of Jesus.

We have somehow found that we can say we're following Jesus and still justify the use of violence and war, and yet as one scripture tells us if Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus. In other words if you can't say that about Jesus, you may as well say you can't know anything, because it's so clear, Jesus said no to violence, no to killing, no to war. Everyone who is a follower of Jesus should do the same -- reject war, refuse to serve in the military, say, "No to war, never again war."

The gospel lesson, I think, shows us how we have to be if we're going to hear this message of Jesus. Jesus tells us, "Stay awake, be alert," and he points out how there will be people in the same situation. One person will hear the word and the other will not. Two people in the field, one will be with Jesus and the other not. Two people grinding wheat, one will hear and be with Jesus, the other left behind.

Where will we be? The one listening, following Jesus? The one alert to his coming during this season of Advent, preparing for the celebration of his historical birth at Christmas? Will we be among the alert -- listening, ready to change ourselves dramatically and radically to follow his way?

We have people who are examples of this for us, and on this first Sunday of Advent this year, Sunday falls on Dec. 2. You may recall that's the anniversary of the martyrdom of four church women from the United States, who were working in El Salvador.

One of them, Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline sister from Cleveland, was someone whom I knew. I can remember, during the summer of 1980, engaging with her in very intense conversations as she was struggling to come to full acceptance of this way of Jesus, because she was living in a very violent situation. She was watching people being taken from their homes and being murdered, and it was very tempting, in a way, to say, "Yes, we should follow the revolutionaries who are trying to overthrow this government and overthrow this violence by using violence."

To most people, that seems sensible -- you have to resist violence with violence -- so she was struggling. One of the people who was a profound example for her, of course, was [Archbishop] Oscar Romero, who himself had gone through the same struggle, but who came to the conclusion that you could only resist violence with love, the way of Jesus. Oscar Romero, two weeks before he died, spoke this truth very powerfully and he had already been murdered in March of that year, 1980.

Dorothy Kazel was using him as her model as she was trying to come to a full acceptance of the way of Jesus, so she knew these words that he had proclaimed, that had been published in a newspaper article. Oscar Romero had spoken with a reporter two weeks before he was shot to death. The reporter was asking him why he was still there in El Salvador. His name had been on the death lists. "Inevitably, you will be killed," the reporter said.

Oscar Romero responded to him: "Of course, I have been threatened with death many times, but I do not believe in death without resurrection, so even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people." He had no doubt about following the way of Jesus, even going through death, because he knew that that leads to new life and would lead to new life with the Salvadoran people. He went on to tell the reporter, "As a shepherd, a follower of Jesus, leading the people, I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love."

"Give my life for those I love ?" and then he says, "that is, for those who may be going to kill me." See, totally ready to follow the way of Jesus -- be killed rather than kill, give my life for those I love, forgive those who are putting me to death, love them even as Jesus did -- extraordinary. Someone who had listened, who had been alert, and when God spoke he heard it and was ready to follow it. So he could tell the reporter then finally, "If, in fact, they do kill me, you may tell them that right now, I forgive and bless those who do it."

There's our example. I know he was an example for Dorothy Kazel as she faced the prospect of her martyrdom, which did happen. I hope he can be the example for all of us as we try to listen deeply to what God is saying. Yes, God will bring the reign of God into its fullness. There will be that time when all nations will go to God's mountain, to follow God's ways, to reject war, to make the reign of God happen, but God is calling all of us to enter into that, to be the ones who accept the way of Jesus, who accept the mission of Jesus to transform our

world into the reign of God.

So today, as we look forward to entering fully into this season of Advent, I hope that each of us will understand that we are preparing, not just to celebrate the historical birth of Jesus, but we are preparing for the reign of God, and it will begin to happen more fully as each one of us more faithfully commits ourselves to following the way of Jesus, which is the way of forgiveness and love, which is the way that will bring peace and the fullness of life into our world. The reign of God will happen, and will happen more quickly as each of us becomes alert and listens and says yes to the way of Jesus.

[Note: Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at the Villia Maria Retreat Center,
near Pittsburgh, Pa., Dec. 1, 2007.]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/26/2015 - 02:24*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/first-sunday-advent-0