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# Third Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 20, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

**I** do find these lessons very powerful in getting us to understand who Jesus really is and what he expects of us. When you look at the gospel lesson, it is suggested - by some at least - that John the Baptist really didn't have any doubts about Jesus; he knew who Jesus was, what he was doing and why, and so he just sent his disciples [to Jesus] for their benefit, because they were reluctant to leave him and follow Jesus. He wanted them to go and be really convinced.

But I think that John was in a situation of doubting and wondering, and maybe profoundly puzzled, because Jesus wasn't living up to his expectations. He expected Jesus to carry on the kind of ministry that John himself had been doing, which was a very, as we might think of it, "Old Testament" type of prophet. Although they weren't all like that, Elijah was one, and Jesus said he was one who was fulfilling the expectation that the chosen people had that Elijah would return.

Jesus suggested that John was Elijah - not literally come back but he was taking the role of Elijah. Yet Jesus wasn't doing what John did. In fact, I read this description of the movie "The Last Temptation of Christ." I have never seen the movie so I haven't seen this scene, but it sounds very powerful. The scene shows Jesus and John in the hollow of a rock, arguing all night about what to do with the world that's out in front of them.

"The Baptist's face is hard and decisive. From time to time, his arms go up and down as though he were chopping wood. Maybe he is showing Jesus just how to lay the ax to the root of the tree of evil" - remember those words that John said the Messiah is going to do, "lay the ax to the root of the tree of evil" - "By contrast, the face of Jesus is calm and hesitant. His eyes are full of compassion. He asks John, 'Isn't love enough?'

"John answers angrily, 'No! The tree is rotten. God called me and gave me the ax, which I placed at the roots of the tree. I did my duty, now you do yours. Take the ax and strike!' Jesus sighs, 'If I were fire, I would burn. If I were a woodcutter, I would strike. But I am a heart, so I love.' "

The contrast is so powerful. John was that prophet of whom Jesus said, "What did you go out to see? One dressed in fine clothing? No. Or living in palaces? No." You went to see this austere, very demanding and harsh person who was condemning. Remember, he called the Pharisees "You brood of vipers," and condemned them for being hypocrites, so he was a prophet in that very powerful, but almost, you would say, negative sense. Jesus explains in the Gospel, and really fulfilling what we heard in the first lesson from Isaiah, how the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead, even, are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. Jesus comes with a whole different methodology, I guess you could say. He is love and he is going to transform the world through love, not through condemnation and punishment.

It's hard to let go of that other way, and we all, I think, at times tend to be judgmental and harsh when we see something wrong. We want to strike it down or punish the wrongdoer - capital punishment, execute them - or by harsh ways keep the immigrants out of our country and send them back, all those sorts of things that you discover going on in our midst.

Within the church, this struggle has gone on. At times, the church has been very harsh and judgmental. At the time of the Inquisition when the church actually condemned people, heretics, burned them at the stakes, and what we did even to a saint like Joan of Arc, this was the official church acting to condemn and destroy what they thought of as evil.

But then at other times in the church, I'm sure you remember and I do, John XXIII coming into the papacy, following the very austere, in some ways, harsh, Pius XII, and John just opening up and the whole world responded to John. It was marvelous, what you saw happening. Then when he called the council, one of the clear directives he said to the council: "This will not be a council where anyone is condemned."

This is what councils always did before. There was always a list of condemnations at the end and it was "Let them be anathema," in other words, let them be condemned, whoever does this, that or the other thing. John said, "None of that at this council. This is going to be a pastoral council where we're going to try to show the church reaching out to the world in love." That's what happened. John just was very attractive to people all over the world.

John XXIII was pictured on *Time* magazine, which is, I guess, not the greatest award you could think of, but still, that just showed how the ordinary people of this world were attracted to him, because he really was following the way of Jesus. And I should say that happened for a while after the council; it just seemed we were reaching out, trying to draw people in. But now we're getting back to a church where the leadership certainly is moving in that direction of condemnation and excluding people, telling people, "You're not welcome to Holy Communion."

"If you're living as a gay person, don't come to this church." That's the message that we give out. Or we have the people who have been divorced and remarried: "You can't come. You're not welcome," or "You may be able to come, but don't dare receive Holy Communion." It just seems like Jesus was saying, "I reach out to anybody with love and welcome them," and I think that's what the church needs to do once more.

If we also think of how the church influences the world around us, our own country needs to draw that lesson, I would think, again, welcoming immigrants instead of building a wall to keep them out; not resorting to violence as the first approach to when you've been attacked, to get even, get back. Instead, being a nation that would be open to drawing people to us by sharing the resources we have, by entering into global accords for the environment and so on, trying to be a real positive member of the community of nations.

We have a lot to try to do within our church, trying to change the attitude of our nation. What St. James says about being patient is something that we have to learn if you're going to act according to this way of love. It will be slow because it requires transformation, but once the transformation happens, the results will be long lasting.

I remember so vividly when I was in Iraq one time and one of the priests, whom I got to know over there quite well, Father [Yusef Merkits] is his name, he said about the people of the United States, "You're so impatient. You want everything to happen at once, so you go to war thinking you can make it happen quickly. If you would have just reached out to us and helped us, we could have transformed the dictatorship in our country and changed it without the results that violence has brought - people homeless, suffering, wounded, killed. But you're so impatient; you're not ready to do the other way."

That's true, not only of us as a nation, but within our church too, I think at times some of the bishops who are so judgmental and make these strong rules against welcoming people - they want to change everything at once instead of saying, "Let's welcome people and let them respond to God's love and be changed." So if we were to do that, have that kind of patience that James says we need to have, then ultimately that reign of God would happen and will happen.

The reign of God, to go back to the first lesson, which I think is such a beautiful expression, kind of poetic but very beautiful, about what God is bringing about: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it. The majesty of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of God, the majesty of our God," so everything will be transformed and we'll have a world that is alive with the goodness and the love of God.

That's what can happen if we, I think, follow the way of Jesus and not follow the way that John seemed to want. It seems, in a way, kind of a harsh statement about John. Jesus says that John was the greatest of all of the Old Testament prophets, but the least in the reign of God is greater than John. But if we really acted according to that way of Jesus, you can see that that's the better way, the beautiful way. Any of us who enter into the reign of God and act according to the way of Jesus surpass what was good in the Old Testament, surpass it and make things new.

So I hope we can follow that way. I'm sure that by this time, John the Baptist is in the fullness of God's reign, so he too is appreciating all that Jesus has done and can continue to do by living out his way of love.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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