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Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 1, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

Every so often throughout the liturgical year as we listen to the scriptures, we will find times when the call of God for us to follow Jesus is made much more explicit and clear than perhaps it has at other times. Today is one of those days when we are being challenged very directly by God through Jesus to become his disciples, to follow him.

It is a very challenging call because as we heard Jesus proclaim, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives," change your lives. The word that is used in the scripture for change - the change of your life - is a word that means to do a complete turnaround, a 180-degree turn, or to completely turn your life upside down. It means a very radical change, and that is what Jesus is calling us to this morning.

Perhaps if we listen carefully to the scriptures, we'll be able to get a rather clear idea of why Jesus wants us to follow him, to change our lives. We notice, of course, how quickly James, John, Andrew and Peter immediately follow Jesus. When he says, "Follow me," they get up and they do it. Well, I have a sense though that probably, it wasn't quite like that.

They might well have heard Jesus preaching. As we understand from this Gospel, he first started to go out and proclaim the good news, "The reign of God is at hand." Matthew seems to suggest [this], because he mentions that Jesus is in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali [these are names of areas in the Northern part of the promised land, in the Northern part of Galilee.] If we noticed in the first lesson today, Isaiah was proclaiming about someone who would come from the area Naphtali and Zebulun, and it's Jesus, of course. So they probably had heard Jesus make the reference to this passage from Isaiah, which we heard this morning, a passage that describes how the chosen people, because they have a very weak king, fail to heed God's command not to enter into an alliance for war, but trust in God and the king refuses to do it.

Then that part of the chosen people are overwhelmed by this war that follows with the Assyrian army. Their land is invaded, their homes are destroyed, the people are driven into exile; it's a terrible time. Then the prophet speaks these words which you heard this morning: "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. A light has dawned on those who live in the land in the shadow of death."

Speaking to God, Isaiah says, "You have enlarged the nation, you have increased their joy. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at harvest time. As on the day of Midian, that defeat, on that day you have broken the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors." God has intervened, and here's something even more dramatic: "Every warriors' boot that trampled in war, every cloak that roiled in blood will be thrown out for burning, will serve as fuel for the fire. For a child is born to us, a son is given to us."

That's Jesus, of course, so Jesus comes to bring a time of peace. The battles are over, war has ended, and Jesus comes into our midst. We, in fact, viewed that passage on Christmas. It is a promise of Isaiah that is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is suggesting, I think, because he draws attention to those words of Isaiah in his first sermon, that "If you follow me, the reign of God will happen."

There will be an end to war, an end to suffering. There will be peace, a deep sense of joy in the heart of every person, peace throughout the earth. Perhaps those first disciples that heard Jesus proclaim these words were inspired by the idealism of Jesus, by the promise of Jesus, by what could happen, so they did immediately leave everything and follow him. They changed their lives dramatically.

So that call of Jesus made to those first disciples is the same thing, that same call is being made to us this morning. God is looking upon us, gazing upon us as we sang that opening hymn. God is saying, "Follow me."

Can we be inspired as those first disciples were and have confidence that if we follow Jesus, we can help change the situation in our world?

After all, it is a world in which there is so much violence, wars going on, wars that we've been engaged in for five years, people suffering, being driven from their homes. There's violence, suffering, terrible things happening. Could the message of Jesus change all of that? Definitely, it could. That's what God is promising through these words that Jesus quotes, that there will be an end to war, there will be an end to suffering, there will be an end to all the turmoil and difficulties that we face as the reign of God comes forth.

Jesus says that reign of God is at hand. If we follow him, we can share with him in trying to bring the reign of God about. But it is something that requires dramatic change in our lives, and if we listen again to what St. Paul writes to that church at Corinth, we discover how radical our call has to be. There are two things that Paul points out.

First of all, in that community where there was so much division going on, people were developing into factions, some following Apollos, some following Paul, some following Peter. Paul says, "None of that! The one thing to do is to focus on Jesus, follow Jesus, no one else. Follow Jesus and his way. That's how the reign of God can break forth."

What is his way? Paul goes on to say, "I was not sent to baptize, but to proclaim the good news, the message about Jesus, the message of Jesus crucified." That's the good news, Paul is saying. "That's what I came to proclaim, to preach." That's what we have to follow - this good news of Christ crucified. Paul goes on to say, to the Jews, that was a scandal, a stumbling block they couldn't get over.

To the Greeks, the intellectuals, the wise ones, it was foolishness. Christ crucified - why does it seem to be such a scandal to some, foolishness to so many others? "Because," Paul says, "I have to preach of Christ," who was willing to executed, to be tortured, who was willing to accept suffering rather than inflict suffering, who was willing to be killed rather than to kill.

Jesus was proclaiming a message of love, giving up violence, and following only the way of love. Of course, to most people that's scandalous. It's a stumbling block that we can't get over, that we have to give up violence, power, strength, coercion, give all of that up and only follow the way of love. To many people it's foolishness, crazy, but Paul says at the end of this passage that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the powerlessness of God is stronger than human strength.

What looks to be weak, God's way of love, is a way of strength. What looks to be a way of foolishness is the wise way and the only way that we can overcome violence, war, suffering and death - the only way that the fullness of God's reign that Jesus promised is at hand, the only way it will happen. So perhaps each of us has to think more deeply, "Am I willing to follow Jesus and his way of love, rather than the way of violence, power, force, the way of war? Am I willing to risk everything to follow Jesus?"

Because there's such a hard challenge, I find that for myself, it's a good thing to think sometimes about people who have accepted that challenge and have followed the way of Jesus. They can be inspirations to us and give us, perhaps, the added courage that we need to say yes to Jesus. In the Acts of the Apostles, we get the account of the first person who died for Jesus, St. Stephen. He died just as Jesus did-loving and forgiving those putting him to death. He accepted suffering rather than inflicting it; he accepted being killed rather than kill.

Down through the ages, other people have done the same thing. We know Francis of Assisi, who during the time of war, went to talk to the enemies, to extend love to the enemies, and was about to bring peace, except that the rulers of the church at the time decided to continue the crusade. In our own time, I think of a person like [Archbishop] Oscar Romero [of San Salvador, El Salvador].

Two weeks before he was shot to death, he was interviewed by a reporter who asked him, "Aren't you afraid? Why don't you leave the country? Your name is on the death list." Oscar Romero says to the reporter, "Look, I have been threatened with death many times, but I don't believe in death without resurrection. Even if they kill me, I will rise again in the people." He was a person who believed in Jesus and knew that even if he died, he would live, but he went on to say even more to that reporter.

He said, "As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love, that is, for those who may be going to kill me." Like Jesus, he loves the very ones who will put him to death. Finally, he says at the end of the interview, "Look, if in fact they kill me, tell them that even now, I forgive and bless those who do it." That's an example from our own time-it happened just a few years ago - of someone who heard the call of Jesus, who followed the call of Jesus.

That's a challenge for each of us today, to hear God's word, to hear Jesus' call, "Follow me. I will make you fishers of people. Through me you will change the world. You will help to make the reign of God happen," so the question is: "Have I the courage and the faith to say yes to Jesus?" "I will follow you and live according to your way of love." If enough of us do this in the world, the reign of God will truly happen.

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