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Third Sunday of Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 29, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

[Editor's Note: Because of technical difficulties, the first few minutes of this homily were not recorded. We regret this error.]

Is God in our midst or not? Well, recently I had an experience that made me realize, and I hadn't thought about it so clearly before, how desperate is the need for water and what people will do to get water. This past year in El Salvador, the government made a move to privatize water. Can you imagine? Something that every human person has a right to, the government is going to sell or allow people to sell for profit, and of course it'll be at a price that probably most of the poor in that country would not be able to pay.

So in one village, Suchitoto, the people organized and began a protest last July. It was a peaceful march and they were attacked by the police and by the army. Thirteen of them were accused of terrorism, which would mean they'd be subject to 60 to 80 years in prison. Well, The SHARE foundation, which advocates for the poor of El Salvador, intervened and together with many other groups, traveled there, met with the people, walked with them, visited with government officials and so on.

Thirteen of them had been kept in jail for over two weeks; they were released. Now finally, just a few days ago, all the charges were dropped, which was a great relief for those people. When I was talking with them and hearing their stories, it became very clear to me. I live in a country where I know, every time I turn on the spigot, I get clean water. What if that were not going to be true? From the experience of these people, I really began to understand more clearly how desperate it is that we have clean drinking water.

So I can sympathize much more with those people in the desert where they were complaining, "Did you bring us out into the desert to die?" Of course, in a few days you would die if you did not have water. So they cried out, "Is God in our midst or not?" Well, at that point, Moses of course, following the directions of God, made sure they had the water that they needed. As I reflected upon this, I also thought about how when Jesus was on the cross, in his desperate need for water, in one of the few things he said from the cross was his desperate cry, "I thirst."

I think in a way maybe he was wondering, "Is God in our midst or not?" because a few moments later, he was crying out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Then Jesus was able to say, because God was with him, "Into your hands I command my spirit." In our lives, I'm sure there are times where we wonder, "Is God in our midst or not?"

There are various ways in which we begin to get discouraged, begin to lose hope in a sense. Some are obviously

much more desperate than others, the reasons why we begin to lose hope. But one of the sad things that I find over and over again in our church, here in the United States, is people becoming very discouraged, feeling the church is letting them down in some way or another, and people are beginning to drift away - it just isn't worth it. They wonder, "Is God in our midst or not?" Some of the issues that confront us in the church that I think cause people to be discouraged and ask that question are made clear in the gospel lesson. If we listen to this lesson carefully, we will see how God is in our midst in Jesus.

One of the first things that we would note if listen very carefully to the gospel, is how Jesus really respected the full humanness of women. That might not seem a big thing to us, but in a society like the one Jesus grew up in, the culture in which he lived, women were not given any worth at all, and there were laws - as we hear in the gospel, Jesus, a practicing Jew - laws that forbade him to even talk to a woman, and certainly not in public.

But Jesus respected women, so he spoke to her. The law meant nothing to him when he weighed the law against respect for this human being. In our church, this is something we still have failed to do, but Jesus is in our midst, this is God in our midst, and if we follow Jesus, we will change that so that women too will have full rights in our church and we will struggle with others who provide them full rights in our society.

Another thing that becomes very clear as we listen to the gospel is that we must also have profound respect for people of other faiths.

There is much violence, even, in our world because of the lack of tolerance for people of other faiths. In our country, there are those who proclaim against what they call "Islamofascism." Without our knowing it, perhaps we have become infected by that spirit of looking down upon Muslims, thinking of Muslims as terrorists, evil people. It's rampant in some parts of our society. On talk radio, you will hear people denouncing what they call these "Islamofascists." They want us to go to war against the Muslim world. How wrong that is.

Jesus makes that so clear when he points out to the woman, "Forget those distinctions about whether you worship at Mount Gerizim or you worship in Jerusalem. God is to be worshiped in spirit and truth because God is spirit." So we worship God, all of us.

Even recently, Pope Benedict rewrote the prayer for Good Friday in which, in those long petitions that we use, we pray for the Jewish people, God's chosen people. It was revised after the Vatican Council because the prayer before that was very insulting to Jewish believers. But now the Pope has revised it again and now it's offensive.

Don't we know what Jesus tells us, and if we want to have peace among religions, we must have a very profound respect, and know that it isn't Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem or any particular place in the world - all of us who understand or who accept God, we must respect one another. That's what Jesus makes so clear, and if we get discouraged about that, we must know once more, God is in our midst through Jesus and God is showing us the way. It's up to us to follow that way.

Another area in which we find ourselves discouraged at times is because we do not allow women to minister in our church. Again, this comes back to full equality for women. Shouldn't we notice what happens in today's gospel? The first person to go and proclaim "Jesus is Messiah" is a woman. Jesus, in effect, has sent her, she

goes back to her village, and she tells all of them about this prophet. They come and they hear from Jesus themselves and become convinced, so they follow Jesus.

Isn't it time that we recognize the gifts of women, so that we could even accept them in full leadership positions in our church? I think it's past time. God is in our midst in Jesus, God is showing us the way. So if we are discouraged and feel that our church is letting us down, it may be important for us to pray this gospel often, and to see and hear Jesus, who is God in our midst, and how Jesus is guiding us, pointing out to us the ways that we must change.

If we listen to Jesus, follow Jesus, knowing that Jesus is God in our midst, we will work for those changes that will make our church really what it's called to be, a community of disciples of Jesus. Everyone equal in freedom and dignity. Everyone capable of carrying out the work that Jesus has left for this community. Everyone invited to participate fully in this community. God is in our midst. Jesus teaches us, shows us the way, and now it is time for us to listen to Jesus, to follow him, and our church will become the community of disciples that Jesus left behind to do his work.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this Homily at the Siena Center in Racine, Wisconsin.]

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