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Fifth Sunday of Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 14, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I would like to express my gratitude for being invited here today to celebrate this Eucharist and to speak this evening. I am also very grateful to all of you. I appreciate very much the opportunity to celebrate the Holy Eucharist in the midst of a community that obviously is a believing and prayerful community. It inspires me very much, and so I thank you for the faith that you manifest here today. I'm also especially pleased that this liturgy includes a scrutiny for those who are about to be received into the church, or to be baptized. It's an honor to be with all of you and to share with you as you continue to grow in your faith and prepare yourself for these sacred celebrations of Holy Saturday night.

Today, of course, is the last Sunday of Lent. Not that our fast and abstinence is over, but truly this is the fifth week of Lent, and next week we celebrate what we call the Sunday of the Lord's Passion, and we begin that very special Holy Week where we go with Jesus through his final days on earth, and through his resurrection to new life.

Because it is this final Sunday of Lent, where we have been instructed week by week on what it means to follow Jesus, all of us - not just those who are being received into the church and who are to be baptized - but all of us on this Lenten journey have been trying to renew our faith, renew the gifts of our baptism, and be prepared to celebrate in a very special way on Easter the resurrection of Jesus, and also our entrance into the new life of Jesus, which comes with his resurrection. So during Lent, we have followed with Jesus his journey.

The first Sunday of Lent, you remember that we began our journey into the desert, 40 days and 40 nights of special prayers, fasting, penance, almsgiving, and we shared with Jesus as he confronted evil in those temptations there in the desert. We were with Jesus as he rejected and resisted that evil. "Be gone, Satan!" We try to do the same thing in our lives, resist evil, and say no to evil, to Satan.

Then we were with James, John and Peter as they went with Jesus up that mount, the mount we call the Mount of Transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, discussing with him his going from this life to new life, and we heard God say to Jesus, "You are my chosen one, my beloved. In you I am well pleased." We came to know Jesus more clearly as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses and the prophets, Elijah, but even more important, on that Sunday, we heard God say about Jesus, "Listen to him. Listen to Jesus."

That's what we must be doing in our lives. We do it especially during this season of Lent. We listen to Jesus so that we may know him more deeply, love him more deeply, follow him more carefully. We listen to Jesus. That next Sunday, we began to get a clearer understanding of what baptism is. Remember that woman at the well,

and Jesus asked her for a drink. She wondered, "Why are you, a Jew, asking me, a Samaritan, for a drink?" It was unheard of that a man would even speak to a woman in public, but especially that a Jew would speak to a Samaritan.

Jesus broke through those barriers. He spoke to the woman and asked her for a drink. When she was startled and seemed to be hesitant, Jesus told her, "If only you knew the water that I could give, you would be asking me for a drink." The water that Jesus can give is that water of baptism. Life-giving water, Jesus calls it. Living water, water that brings us new life, water that Jesus says if we drink this water we will never thirst again because we will have the spirit of God within us.

So our deepest thirst, and not just the physical thirst for water, but our deepest thirst will be fulfilled. That longing we have for joy, for peace, for calmness in our lives, the longing we have for assurance of a fullness of life. Baptism and our renewal of the gift of baptism brings us that living water that only Jesus can give. Last Sunday, we were with Jesus as he met the man born blind and the one to whom Jesus gave the gift of sight.

If you remember last Sunday's gospel, it was much more than physical sight. That was extraordinary, and the man was totally grateful that he could see. He'd never seen. Now he could see, but remember the Jewish religious leaders who questioned the man, who demanded to know who did this, especially on the Sabbath day? The man said, "I'm not sure. I don't know who it was, but I know I was blind, and now I see."

They said, "Well, who was it?" he said, "He must be a prophet." They wouldn't accept that. You see, what John was pointing out in that gospel was that sometimes those who are supposed to see, really don't see and then, someone like this blind beggar not only got physical sight, but he got the sight of faith. He could see deeply and he saw finally at the end of that lesson, "This person who cured me is not just a prophet, he is the Son of Man." And he went down and worshipped Jesus.

That's a gift we, too, get from baptism. We get the gift of sight, and not just physical sight, but what is far more important, we, too, see Jesus now as Son of God as well as son of Mary. A Jesus who is God and human. We have that sight of faith, and we deepen it now. As we go into the final week, the week of the Lord's Passion, and we celebrate the gift of Easter, we will celebrate the deeper faith that each of us has now received.

Today, of course, we have our final lesson about baptism, the gift that baptism is. It's the gift of life, but not life just in this world, a life that inevitably will end. It's a life into the fullness of life forever. Jesus makes this so clear, and we hear it today in a special way through the lessons. In that first lesson, Ezekiel went back 500 and some years in the history of the chosen people. Ezekiel was speaking to a people who were in exile, whose lives had been devastated, who were ready to give up hope.

Ezekiel has this extraordinary vision. We didn't hear it in today's lesson, but it's what preceded today's lesson, where he sees that valley of dry bones and God says, "Say to those bones, 'Rise up.' " He does, and he has this great vision of all these dead bones coming to life, slowly and gradually but fully to life. God says to Ezekiel, "Those are my people. They're dead now.

"Go and proclaim to them. Prophesy to them that God will deliver them, that they will have hope and life again and be restored to their own place and rebuild their temple." In a very short time, that vision of Ezekiel was

fulfilled when the chosen people were released from their exile and brought back to new life. It's in the gospel especially that we learn about the new life.

Before we reflect on that, I think there are a couple of points of this gospel that are very important for us to reflect on and try to take into ourselves, that we might miss because we go through the gospel and it's long. We try to listen, but we don't hear it all. First of all, if we listen carefully to the gospel, we discover that Jesus was one who developed deep friendships.

A couple of times John remarks how Martha, Mary and Lazarus are friends of Jesus, and that's what we can be. He invites us into a friendship with him. In fact, if we listen to the discourse of Jesus at the Last Supper, he says to his disciples, the whole community gathered there, "I no longer call you servants. I call you friends. You are my friends."

We need to hear Jesus saying that to us, "You are my friend, someone bonded to me in love." We have human friendships, so we can have this kind of friendship with Jesus. It's a beautiful and great gift, but we must nurture it like we have to nurture any friendship. Jesus wants to be our friend, bonded to us in trust and love.

The other point of the gospel that, again, we might miss, but I think is so important, is how deep that friendship of Jesus for us becomes, and how human Jesus really is. In that gospel, as Jesus stands before the tomb, John uses words about Jesus, saying he was disturbed, deeply, deeply disturbed. His whole being was filled with emotion, first of all, a kind of anger at death for separating this beloved brother from his sisters and his family, but also a sharing of grief.

Jesus loved Martha and Mary, John says, so he wept with them. How many times in our lives, when we experience some deep sorrow, as we all do, we can then turn to Jesus and know that he shares our grief, our sorrow, because he's one like us. It's so clear in today's gospel that Jesus is fully human, so he weeps with us when we weep.

Jesus is also God, so that's why he can stand in front of that tomb and say, "Remove the stone," and then he can cry out, "Lazarus, come forth." Lazarus is resuscitated. He's alive and all of this, of course, is only a sign really, of what happens to Jesus after he goes through the torture and agony of his crucifixion and then comes to new life.

Finally, what is so important in today's gospel, as we reflect on this new life that comes to us through baptism, we're raised up with Jesus as he is raised from the dead. We go down into the waters of baptism, but are raised up to new life. There's one part of that gospel that is so very important, where Martha says to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."

Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha replied, "Well, I know he will rise in the resurrection at the last day." Martha was thinking in terms of the final renewal of life for all the people of all of history, the last day. He will rise then. But listen to these words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection. Whoever believes in me, though they die, shall live. Whoever is alive by believing in me will never die."

Then he says to Martha, "Do you believe this?" Martha says, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who is coming into the world." What Martha was learning from Jesus at that point is that it isn't just at the end of the world that we rise to new life. It's now. Through our baptism, each of us is risen to new life.

That's why Paul would say in writing to the church in Rome in our second lesson today, "If you did not have the spirit of Christ, you would not belong to him, but Christ is within you. Though your body is branded by death, the spirit is life and holiness, and if the spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead is within you, then he who raised Jesus from among the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies. Yes, God will do it through God's spirit who dwells within you."

This is what we need to remember now. We are already risen people, alive with the life of Jesus, and so, we rejoice in that but we also are challenged by that because it means if we live with the life of Jesus, we already enter into the fullness of life. We can begin to experience the peace that only Jesus can give, the joy that Jesus wants us to have in its fullness.

We begin to experience that as long as we now live according to the pattern of life that Jesus declares is the life of heaven, the life of the kingdom. That means that we then have to try to follow very faithfully where Jesus leads us, how to live in this world, where we have to confront evil, have to resist evil. We have to live according to the pattern that Jesus lays out for us, and that he followed himself.

This, of course, is something that we could dwell on for many, many reflections, but today, I'd like to suggest one thing that we need to try to do if we're going to live this new life that we share through baptism. Jesus laid it out for us when he preached his first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. He set forth the values that are his values.

Blessed are the poor, those who do not try to have more than they need, those who trust in God, that God will give them everything they need. Blessed are the gentle, those who are not harsh and violent. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, who try to make the world a better place for everyone. Blessed are those who are merciful, reaching out in compassion.

Blessed are those who are peacemakers, those who follow the way of Jesus, rejecting violence, war and killing. We need to follow this pattern of life that Jesus sets before us. It's our calling. It's our privilege, because we have been gifted with the spirit life of Jesus, who is Son of God, who is one of us, our friend, our companion, but who calls us to try to change our world.

By following his way, we will bring peace into our hearts. We will know the joy of Jesus, and we will also, by following his way, change our world, slowly but surely, into the reign of God, the reign of justice, peace and love, the reign of fullness of life for every person. I hope that as we now complete this season of Lent this week, and then go with Jesus through Holy Week, that we will rise with him on Easter Sunday morning, renewed in our baptism, renewed in our commitment to follow his way, to bring his fullness of life into our world.

[On March 9, Bishop Gumbleton preached at St. James Church in Johnson City, New York.]

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