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Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 4, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

This gospel, the incident described today, happened immediately after last Sunday's gospel, the incident that happened there. That seemed to be such a great moment for Simon Peter and for the other disciples because, as Peter declared, they knew, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But at the end of that passage, last Sunday, Jesus said something that might have seemed strange to us because he told those disciples at that moment: "Don't tell anybody. Don't tell anybody that I am the Messiah."

Wouldn't you think that Jesus would want everybody to know what those disciples had come to know, that Jesus is the Son of God, the Anointed One sent by God? But he had told them, "No, be quiet. Keep it to yourselves." Why? Because as we discovered today, when Jesus says to Peter, "Peter, you're not thinking according to God's ways. You are thinking according to human ways."

You see, Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but what was he thinking of? He was thinking of a Messiah that would be a new King David, the greatest king in the history of the chosen people, the one who was a ruler by arms and military force. Jesus was not to be that kind of Messiah. But it was very difficult for those disciples to begin to think according to the way of God rather than human ways.

I guess if we're honest about it, probably every one of us would also have to say, "Yes, it is very hard to try to think according to God's ways, to act according to God's ways and not human ways." That's not surprising. I'm sure many of us remember the passage in the book of Isaiah where is says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways, says God. For as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts."

God's ways are totally different.

Jesus understood that because he would have, I'm sure, prayed often over what happened to Jeremiah, which we heard in the first lesson today where Jeremiah was preaching to the chosen people against war, against going to arms, telling them they had to find another way. But because Jeremiah spoke that way, the priest, the leader had him beaten, whipped with lashings, put in stocks. People came and mocked him, laughed at him. He was trying to teach God's ways. The people rejected him.

I'm sure Jesus, when he was reflecting on the scriptures and they were the source of his prayers, he often, I'm sure, thought about a prophet like Jeremiah and knew that as he told the disciples today, "I have to go up to Jerusalem. I'll be handed over to my enemies. They'll torture me, beat me, execute me, humiliate me."

But that's God's way, as Jesus shows us when this happens, because God's way is a way of returning good for evil, returning love for hate, acting with nonviolence against violence, loving even your enemies, forgiving your enemies.

That's the way of Jesus and he showed us that way so dramatically as he gave over his life and prayed for the very ones putting him to death, "Father, forgive them."

See, Jesus is teaching us a different way, but it's a way that's very difficult to accept. It's the way of hungering and thirsting for justice. It's a way of identifying with the poor, the way of being with those who mourn and grieve, the way of the peacemaker. This is the way of Jesus. Peter had not even begun to understand it, certainly not to accept it. He was telling Jesus, "No, you don't have to go that way. You have all these clouds following you. You can be a leader like David," but Jesus says, "No."

It's a different way. What it will require of those disciples and of us is what St. Paul says today, "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind and heart." Be transformed, radically changed by the renewal of your mind and your heart, changed according to the way of Jesus.

This weekend, I think, it's a particularly good weekend for us to reflect on these words of Jesus and on the demands that he makes of us if we want to really be his disciples. "If you want to follow me, deny your very self, pick up your cross and follow me."

It's a good week because tomorrow we celebrate Labor Day. One of the ways of Jesus is to work for justice. We know we live in a world where there is an extraordinary, unbelievable chasm between the rich and the poor. As Archbishop [Oscar] Romero [of El Salvador] used to say, "So few have so much, so many have so little," and that's not right.

You have to work for justice in many ways, but one that comes to my mind, especially today because tomorrow is Labor Day, is justice for workers in our world, in our country, in our Catholic institutions. Pope Paul said a long time ago, "If you're going to preach justice," speaking to the church, "IF we're going to preach justice, we have to be a church of justice."

In the news a couple of weeks ago, I read an article and I've been following this carefully because I'm involved with the union that is struggling for justice for workers in hospitals. Not the nurses or the doctors or the corporate leaders, but those who have to clean the rooms and take care of the bed pans and do all that kind of menial work.

They're very underpaid. There's a huge Catholic hospital system in California that is fighting the efforts of the people there to have a union. In fact, why this was in the paper so recently was because the National Labor Relations Board just issued a judgment that this hospital system had been involved in 35 clear violations of labor law in different hospitals, 18 different supervisors. It's a whole effort on the part of the corporate hospital system to fight off a union, to prevent the workers from getting justice.

See how wrong that is. It's not the way of Jesus, certainly. "Hunger and thirst for justice" is what Jesus tells us when he sets up his set of values into the attitudes. Then even more this weekend, this gospel is very timely when we think about the way of Jesus.

Probably many of us watched last Thursday night when Sen. [Barack] Obama made that extraordinary acceptance speech as the [presidential] nominee of the Democratic Party. During that speech, you remember he invoked Dr. King and he reminded all of us that it was 45 years ago that Dr. King with a crowd of 300,000 people in a mall in Washington cried out those beautiful words, "I have a dream. I have a dream," and it was a dream of justice and equality and peace.

In yesterday's *The New York Times*, you can read a story by Bob Herbert, one of the *Times* op-ed writers. He came to Detroit and he interviewed people here in Detroit Thursday night after they watched that speech. One man said, "I was in Clarksdale Mississippi when Emmett Till passed away, " Willie Banks, a sales representative.

Bob Herbert says, "Till is one of the more notorious lynchings of the 20th Century. He was a 14-year-old black who was kidnapped, mutilated and murdered in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling or perhaps saying something fresh to a white woman. Photographs of his bloated, partially decomposed body circulated widely. Mr. Banks was 12 at the time."

"Those pictures really stuck in my mind," [Banks] said. "The message I got was if I stepped out of my place that could happen to me. You shouldn't have to think that way but that's the way I thought. So, no, I never thought I would see a black man nominated for President. This is a great day."

Herbert quotes two or three other people, but then one:

"It's so very exciting," said Pearl Reynolds, who is 92 and whose elegant bearing and dress belied her hard-scrabble origins in Oakridge, Louisiana, where she worked as a child in the cotton fields. "I got married at 14 only because I wanted to get out of there," she said. "I had to. At 14, I was just being promoted from the second grade to the third grade because we could only go to school when we weren't working in the fields."

She became quite emotional during Sen. Obama's speech. "Barack Obama is a measure of how far we've come as a country since I was a little girl," she said with tears coming down her face.

And it's true. Dr. King's dream is perhaps being fulfilled. But what we have to remember, and what I hope we'll hold our presidential candidates to, is that Dr. King's dream was more than what happened to those two people. It was more because it uprooted a whole different way of bringing about justice.

Dr. King preached nonviolence and love, forgiveness, return good for evil, love for hate, allow yourself to suffer rather than to inflict suffering, accept death rather than kill. See, Dr. King's message is the message of Jesus. Yes, it's a great thing that we've come as far as we have, but we have a long way to go if in this country we're

going to live up to that dream and live up to the way of Jesus.

That's what today's gospel message is about -- trying to understand that we must follow God's ways, not human ways. Just as Jesus challenged Peter, we must listen to God, follow God's ways. Perhaps it's best summed up for us and also tells us the fruit of what will happen if we begin to do this, if we undergo that radical transformation of our minds and hearts.

When Paul was writing to the church of Corinth, he wrote very vehemently at one point, "Here am I preaching a crucified Christ. See, this is what I have to preach: A Jesus who would not retaliate, a Jesus who would not strike out at his enemies, a Jesus who would only return love for hate. This is what I have to preach: a Jesus who gives up power, wealth and prestige, a Jesus who allows himself to be crucified -- but continues to love in response."

Paul says, "To the Jews that's a scandal, and to the Greeks and wise people it's foolishness."

I guess if we think in human ways, what Jesus did is a scandal, a stumbling block and it is foolishness. As Paul said to those people at Corinth, "But the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

We must pray today that we can accept the foolishness of God and the weakness of God, take up our cross, and follow Jesus. That's how we'll bring peace and justice into our world.

[Note: Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Charles Parish, Detroit.]

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