

## Second Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 12, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

If we listen carefully to the scripture lessons today, we, I'm sure, will discover how well they fit in with what we've been reflecting on over the last day and a half, how we have to change our hearts, how we are to have the mind, the heart, the attitude, the spirit, the way of Jesus. What Paul spoke as I opened the retreat: "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, who though he was God emptied himself," and so on. We have to undergo a deep, deep change within ourselves.

The lessons today reinforce this call that we first heard in this retreat from St. Paul, invited into the church at Philippi. John the Baptist comes on the scene. He begins to carry out the role of a prophet from the Old Testament. There had been no prophets like Jeremiah, Hosea, Malachi, Ezekiel, and the rest of them, for many, many decades, so John was kind of a new phenomenon from the old times. He came as a prophet, going out into the desert, living in penitence, surviving on locusts and wild honey, dressed in very penitential clothing, and he began to preach in a way that the prophets of old had done, using symbols.

Like Jeremiah, he wanted to show the people what was to happen to them when they were unfaithful to the covenant. Jeremiah held up a jug and then shattered it. The people would be torn apart and then carried off in exile because they were unfaithful. John was using the same kind of dramatic symbol as he invites people to undergo a baptism.

First of all, it's an adaptation of what was common for the Jewish people when they were bringing a convert, a Gentile, into the Jewish covenant. They would undergo a baptism that would be a reminder of how the chosen people, when God led them through the desert to the promised land, brought them from slavery in Egypt to freedom, they had gone through the waters of the Red Sea, so John used this, what was done for converts to Judaism. They would go through the bath of the water of the Jordan and be baptized as though they were going through the Red Sea, renewing that experience.

But now, John used this for the Jewish people themselves. He adapted the symbol, but now it was a symbol of going through the waters to being cleansed of sin, to renew their commitment to the covenant, to the Torah. So this was a baptism of repentance and a baptism of renewal, a baptism calling people to a new faithfulness to the way that God had showed them.

But then John goes beyond that and promises, "There will be one stronger than I. Another one is coming, the strap of whose sandal I'm not even worthy to untie. This stronger one is going to cleanse you, baptize you with the water of the Holy Spirit and you'll become completely new people."

John proclaims using the words, first of all, of the prophet Malachi: "Here is my messenger that I'm sending among you," and that messenger is sent ahead of this stronger one to clear the way, and would expect of those, according to Malachi, those who want to be baptized by this stronger one with the water of the Holy Spirit must no longer oppress the wage earner, the widow and the orphan, must no longer disrespect the rights of the immigrant.

This is the very thing that we've been talking and praying about in our retreat, doing justice, and it is significant, I think, that justice has to do with just wages, and for us, getting rid of sweatshops, getting rid of trade agreements that bring oppression to workers in Central America and Latin America, writing fair trade agreements, respecting the rights of foreigners.

We have a huge immigration problem in our country. We treat the immigrants in very harsh ways. God has always called for immigrants to be welcomed, to bring this foreigner in, and we're driving them away, even building a wall to keep people out.

So as John announces this stronger one who was to come and says, "I'm sending my messenger ahead of him to clear the way," that's part of what has to be cleared away -- the injustices that were prevalent then and are prevalent in our society.

John also cites the prophet Isaiah, the one who is going to prepare the way. Here too, there's a call to do justice and to understand that God is the one who, if we open ourselves to God, will make this happen.

We do not have to fear trying to follow this new one stronger than John because he will come like a shepherd who tends his flock, gathers the lambs in his arms, carries them in his bosom, gently leading those that are with young, a god who is tender and kind, the stronger one, who is calling us to reform our lives, but who is with us to carry us even as a shepherd would carry a tiny sheep. He comes to us with love.

This stronger one, who is going to baptize us in the spirit, means that we will be given new life if we open ourselves to the way of God, to the call that is being given to us.

There are many places in the prophets where the baptism of the spirit, or the cleansing with the spirit is described, but perhaps one of the most comforting one is in the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

This is where John would be talking about when he says he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit, drench you with Holy Spirit. "I will gather you from all the nations, bring you back to your own land, and I shall pour pure water over you. You shall be made clean, cleansed from the defilement of all your idols. I shall give you a new heart. Remove your hearts of stone, give you a heart of flesh, a human heart, a loving heart. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your ancestors and you shall be my people; I shall be your God."

Yes, this is what is promised to us if we undergo the renewal, this new baptism, a baptism in the holy spirit, if

we try to do the righteousness, work for justice, if we try to welcome the immigrant, bring justice to people we interact with as a nation for trade agreements. All of this, God will help us to do by pouring this new spirit into our heart. Then the outcome of our conversion if we open ourselves truly to God, if we allow God to work within us, listen to God, follow God's ways.

It's described so well by Peter.

We are waiting for a new earth in which justice resides. It will happen, again, if we open ourselves to God's way. And therefore, beloved brothers and sisters, as you wait in expectation of this, continue to change your heart that God may find you rooted in peace. And so that is the promise that we receive, as we experience the call once more to follow God's way, to truly listen to Jesus, to accept what he asks of us, to do it. Then justice will reside in our midst, and our hearts will be rooted in peace.

[Bishop' Gumbleton preached this homily at the Shalom Retreat Center, Dubuque, Iowa.]

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