

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 31, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

We're grateful to the children and their leaders for providing us with a visual presentation of what we heard in the gospel lesson this evening. It takes much effort through pageants like that and even more through our reflection -- careful, prayerful reflection -- to try to get a grasp of the mystery that we celebrate tonight.

I think many of us, in a sense, find it almost too easy to believe that Jesus was Son of Man and son of God.

It's really a profound mystery and if we are to begin to plumb the depth of the mystery, perhaps we should put ourselves in the situation of those first disciples, the ones that Jesus gathered about him when he began his public life, or even before that his own parents and relatives. They knew Jesus fully in his humanness, and they had no real idea that this was God living in their midst. All that came later when Jesus was executed, tortured and put to death, but then rose from the dead, and then suddenly the disciples began to understand. There was more to Jesus than they had ever realized: This is not just the son of Mary, it's the son of God.

So as we reflect on the scriptures tonight, we can recognize readily that that passage from Isaiah was not written about Jesus; it was written about Hezekiah, a king who was going to come and free the chosen people from their persecutors, their occupiers. But the words, when you look back and you realize that these were spoken about a human king, they were so appropriate to Jesus, because in a deeper sense, Jesus does everything that God promised the people would happen through Hezekiah.

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. A light has dawned on those who live in the land of the shadow of death. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy, they rejoice before you, for the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, you have broken as in the day of Midian.

So Hezekiah is welcomed as a child is born to us, a son is given to us? Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.? The first disciples began to realize that Jesus, the one they had known as their friend or relative, family member, was this Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, son of God, and they tried to put it all together -- a human who is really the very presence of the Almighty God in our midst.

And we can easily appropriate too, the words of Paul to Titus: A savior has been revealed through God's loving plan, but it's really while we await our blessed hope, the glorious manifestation of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, but not at the time of his birth; this is the Jesus who is the Lord of heaven and earth, the son of God in power.

So they can proclaim now that Jesus has risen from the dead, they come to know him. Not just as a tiny infant lying in a manger in Bethlehem, not as the child growing up, being lost at one time, a child who continued to grow in wisdom, age and grace before God and all the people -- see, one who was like us in every way except sin. This is Jesus, son of God and son of Mary.

So the scripture lessons really aren't intended to be an historical record about Jesus Christ; they're a theological reflection on who Jesus is. I think it's very important that we try, in the depth of our own heart, to grasp this mystery, that somehow in Jesus, God is fully present, the God who is the creator of heaven and earth, but also this God has now become one of us, entered into our history to transform it, to move it forward til our history eventually becomes the fullness of God's reign of goodness and love and peace.

But that will happen only if we not only try to reflect on who Jesus is, but if we also reflect even more perhaps on why Jesus came.

Why did the son of God break into time, into human history, to become one of us?

There are many ways we could give an answer to that, but I think that perhaps one of the best reflections or responses to "Why did God come to be one of us?" is found in the Eucharistic prayer that I use generally when I celebrate Mass. You've heard it. After we sang the "Holy, Holy, Holy," then we proclaim:

"Yes, God, you are holy. You are kind to us and to all. For this we thank you. We thank you above all for your son Jesus. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and that you are the one God of us all."

One God of us all.

And Jesus brought us the good news of life to be lived with you forever in heaven. Jesus brought us the good news about the reign of God, the fullness of life, the fullness of peace and joy. He brought us that good news and he showed us the way to that fullness of life, the way of love, and he has gone that way before us.

That's the part of the message that is so important. Jesus brought us the good news about how we transform our world into the reign of God, make it a world where fullness of life is possible for everyone, where there is joy and peace and love.

Sometimes I think, when we hear that Jesus showed us the way that that would happen, the way of love, we think that maybe that's easy, but it really isn't.

The kind of love that Jesus taught is a love that we find very hard to develop within our hearts, because it's not only "love those who love you," it's "love your enemy, do good to those who hurt you, return good for evil." That's the way of love Jesus taught.

And because, within the context of this Christmas celebration, we're waiting for the inauguration of a new president in our country and it's one that breaks our history open in a certain sense. It's an extraordinary moment in the history of this country. I think we can appreciate the depth of change that this demonstrates, if we remember how this was prepared for.

It happened over many years of civil rights movement until finally it's possible that we can have an African-American as our president. It happened because we had people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who understood what the way of love, the way that Jesus taught, what that meant.

You've heard this passage before but I think it is so powerful and so pertinent, demonstrating to us how the way of love can change things. These are words that Dr. King proclaimed in Birmingham, Alabama. He was preaching to a crowd of people who had suffered abuse and violence, and he exhorted them:

"We must say to our white brothers and sisters all over the South who try to keep us down, "We will match your

capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force.

?We will not hate you, and yet we cannot, in all good conscience, obey your evil laws. Do to us what you will. Threaten our children and we will still love you. Say that we're too low, that we're too degraded, yet we will still love you.

?Bomb our homes. Go by our churches early in the morning and bomb them if you please, and we will still love you. We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, but in winning the victory, we will not only win our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience, that we will win you in the process.?

The way of love?that?s what Jesus taught, that?s why he came, to show us the way of love and what can happen if we live out that way of love.

Just a few years ago, nobody would have thought it possible that an African-American would become president of the United States, and yet it will happen in just a few days. But that?s because Martin Luther King lived out the way of love and called upon his people and upon all of us to live the same way, the way of love.

So we have to do that as individuals in our family life, in our community, in our workplace, everywhere. We must try to be those who follow the way of Jesus, the way of love. And my hope is that we will do this not only as individuals (and each of us can determine ?how best I can live out the way of love?), but to me it?s very important that we continue to struggle as a people, as a nation, to make that way of love our way of life.

I think that?s especially important when it comes to the matter of using violence in our world, being so quick to go to war. I suggest and I hope that many will try to follow this suggestion, that we urge our new president to take up a challenge that was offered by President John Kennedy in 1961 the first time he spoke before the United Nations, the leaders of all the nations of the world.

He said some extraordinary words that I think have been forgotten, but that we have to bring forward now. In addressing the people of all the nations, John Kennedy said:

?Today every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.

?It is therefore our intention to challenge the Soviet Union, not to an arms race, but to a peace race -- to advance together, step by step, stage by stage, until general and complete disarmament has been achieved.?

John Kennedy began on that path. We fell away from it very quickly after he was assassinated, but we must take up that path once more. It?s part of the way of love that Jesus shows to us when he brings us the good news of our being able to live the life of God forever, of our being able to transform our world into the reign of God.

The way of love is the way we must try to live as individuals and as a nation.

So we urge our president to begin to wage a peace race, to begin to reach out to other nations to listen, to understand, to negotiate, rather than to use armed force.

It will require tremendous change in all of us and in our whole nation, but I am confident that if we listen deeply to why Jesus came, reflect upon it, and understand that he came to show us the way of love, and that he went that way before us and we must follow in order to bring the fullness of the joy and peace that we experienced

tonight into our lives, not just for now, but forever.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Leo Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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