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Third Sunday of Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 19, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

If we listen very deeply to these readings today, we will have a deeper understanding and perhaps a greater commitment about what it means to enter into the season of Lent. As we approach the second half of Lent, we will be more sincere in our efforts to bring about deep and profound renewal in our hearts and our souls.

I know that we are celebrating a beautiful feast today, the Feast of St. Patrick, and all of us rejoice in our heritage as Irish descendents of that great disciple to the land of Ireland. I should join you. I have discovered that my own ancestors came from both the north in Derry and the south around the city of Cork.

In spite of the fact that we are in a celebratory mood, we must take a few moments now to remind ourselves that we are in the season of Lent. We need to continue our commitment to change our lives as Jesus proclaimed at the beginning, to change our lives and believe the Gospel.

Today's Readings
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11
1 Corinthians 1:22-25
John 2:13-25
Full text of the readings [1]

The lessons today enable us to understand what Jesus is calling us to. That passage from the gospel is probably one of the ones that we remember very easily from the gospel, because it is so dramatic. We can easily picture Jesus being very angry, which perhaps surprises us, so we can remember it. Jesus angry? Yes, he was. He was angry because they had turned the temple into a marketplace. They were buying and selling, exploiting the poor, pretending to give honor and glory to God, yet in fact paying no attention to that covenant, those responsibilities that they had accepted as the chosen people, which we heard about in the first lesson today.

Those commandments we are very familiar with, but as the passage goes on, those responsibilities that they had accepted to live sincerely as God's people, responding to the goodness of the God who had said "I will be your God and you will be my people. But only if you carry out these responsibilities are you truly my people."

As we listen to what happens in that temple, we realize that those people and perhaps as we look at our own lives, we too, fail in many ways to be faithful people of God.

The incident as it is described in John's Gospel comes at the beginning public life of Jesus. The other three Gospels also give an account of this same incident, which makes it pretty clear that this is something that really happened in the life of Jesus. But the other gospel writers put it in the very last week of the life of Jesus. In fact, they suggest that this is the turning point. When Jesus acted this way in the temple, those Jewish leaders who felt threatened by his actions decided that he must go. So the settled upon their plan to hand him over to Roman authorities to be crucified. If we look at the ways in which the incident is described in the other Gospels, especially the gospel of Mark, we get a better understanding of why Jesus was so angry.

Mark when he describes what was done in his Gospel makes reference to two passages from the Hebrew scriptures. One from the book of the prophet Isaiah and the other from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. So if

we turn to those passages, we see what Jesus is so upset about, and what he has come to change.

In Isaiah, the prophet proclaims these words: "God says to the foreigners, who joined God, serving God and loving God's name. 'I will bring them to my holy mountain. Give them joy in my house of prayer. You have made my house of prayer into a market place.' But God then said, 'I will make this house of prayer a place where all the people's of the earth can come. I will accept on my altar their burnt offerings and sacrifices. For my house will be a house of prayer for all the nations."
Isaiah is proclaiming what Mark draws attention to when Mark refers to that passage, that the reign of God is at now hand. And that the reign of God is open to everyone. No exclusions. No one will be turned away. Everyone is welcome. God is the God of all people. Every person. So we must rid ourselves of those tendencies to exclude and only be with our own. God's reign is a reign for every one.

When Mark refers to Jeremiah, he refers to a passage where 600 years before that prophet had stood outside the temple that Solomon had just recently built and he is proclaiming these words: "Stand at the gate of Yahweh's house and proclaim this in a loud voice. Listen to what God says all you people of Judah. Yahweh, the God of Israel, says this, Amend your ways and I will stay with you. Rely not on empty words, such as look at the temple of Yahweh, this is the temple of Yahweh."

You see, God was telling them that this building is not going to be what brings you closer to God. So don't say "temple of Yahweh" as if that is something that makes you holy.

"It is far better for you to amend your ways and to act justly. Do not abuse the stranger, the orphan or the widow. And then I will stay with you in the land I gave your ancestors in times past. Is this house on which rests my name a den of thieves? I have seen this myself, but it is God who speaks."

What God is referring to is that people are not faithful. The temple has become a haven for thieves, for those who reject God's ways. So Jesus must clear the temple. Change everything dramatically. That is what he is doing when he drives out those money changers, drives out the animals for the sacrifice. He is saying that something new is happening. The new convent of God is taking place now, and you are bieng called to enter into it.

Perhaps nothing more dramatically describes what this new convent will be than those words from our second lesson today, where Paul tells those Christians at Corinth, and says to us this morning, "Look, I did not come to baptize. No I came to proclaim the message of Jesus. A message that you can't say in human words, because here am I, Paul says, here am I preaching a crucified Christ. A crucified Christ. One who is helpless, powerless and weak. But one who does not return evil for evil, hatred for hatred, violence of violence, but only returns love. That is the Jesus I am preaching, the Jesus who said that when I am lifted up on the cross will draw all people to me through love. The new way of Jesus.

Paul goes on to say, of course to the Jews, that is a scandal, that anyone would simply let himself be given over to his executioners, and only return love. That is a scandal. And to the Greeks, supposedly wise people, it's foolishness, it's crazy. Why would anyone do that? But as Paul concludes to the Christians at Corinth and to us, that weakness of God is stronger than human strength. That foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.

Are we ready to accept this new way of Jesus? The way that rejects violence and hatred. The way that opens up the reign of God to everyone. The way that returns love for hate, good for evil, nonviolence for violence. Are we ready? Probably not.

This is our call during this last part of Lent to enter more deeply into the season of Lent and to discover the ways that we must be faithful to Jesus and to his way. And remember what Jesus says in that Gospel of John. Destroy this temple -- they thought immediately of the building -- and I will raise it up -- He was talking about

his body -- I will live among you. I will be a living temple.

That is what Jesus says to those people through this dramatic action and what he is telling us. Jesus is alive in our midst. He lives in very one of us. We make up the temple of God. We especially do that when we live faithfully according to the way of Jesus. There are many ways in which each of us must take seriously that Jesus is giving us a new covenant, a new testament, a new way of being related to God and one another.

In our everyday lives, we must live out that message of Christ crucified, that message where you return love for hate, every day in every part of our lives, that as a people, as a church as a nation.

Just this past week, perhaps you read in the press or heard on the news, what is happening in Ireland once more. Something very important us. There has been peace in Ireland since those Easter accords of over 10 years ago. But now people are saying that now we must return to violence. There are those who are saying that we must carry on that useless and senseless war among ourselves. How evil. How contrary to the way of Jesus. How easily that happens though, in Irealand but here too. And so we must pray for the people Ireland, our people, that they won't return to that way of violence but will continue to live the way of love, the way of peace.

We must pray for ourselves that we too as individuals and as a nation will deeply understand what Jesus is teaching us through this action at that temple 2,000 years ago. That we will deeply understand it and that we will live, carry out our lives, in every way, every aspect of our lives, live them according to this way of Jesus crucified. The way of Love. The way that will bring peace to our hearts and peace to our word.

(This homily preached at St. Patrick Parish, Detroit, Mich.)

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