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Fifth Sunday of Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 2, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

We begin this week the Fifth week of Lent, the beginning of the last two weeks of the season of prayer and penance. We refer to this time as the time of the Lord?s Passion. This is the first Sunday of the Lord?s Passion. Next Sunday is the second Sunday of the Lord?s Passion, which we call Palm Sunday. During these two weeks, the readings draw our eyes to look on the crucified Jesus and to focus on what God is doing through Jesus, his death and his resurrection. And what God asks of us if we are to follow Jesus.

Today's Readings
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15
Hebrews 5:7-9
John 12:20-33
Full text of the readings [1]

The Gospel as we begin to look at Jesus and look toward his death, the Gospel reveals a moment of supreme crisis in Jesus? and in his life. If we go back to the beginning of Lent, we remember on the First Sunday of Lent, we reflected on Jesus going off into the desert to spend 40 days and nights in prayer, penance and fasting. During that time, he was confronted with the devil and temptation.
We reflected on those temptations at the beginning of Lent, how Jesus was tempted. Turn stones into bread and have all that you need, abundance of wealth. Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple. Be prestigious, draw everyone?s attention to you. And finally the temptation to have all the kingdoms of the world, the power to dominate. The devil says, ?I will give you all that if you fall down and worship me.? Jesus says, ?Be gone Satan? and drives him away.

We might have thought that was the end of struggle for Jesus, that he knew from that point on he knew exactly where God was leading him and could follow him without difficulty. But actually in the account of those temptations -- Mark and Luke both say -- the devil left him for a time. Jesus continued to be tempted. In this gospel lesson today, that is exactly what is happening. He is being tempted to give it all up.

These outsiders are coming to him, obviously because he is so well known. His fame is beginning to spread. He is the wonder worker; this marvelous person who draws huge crowds of people. The temptation is there to take advantage of that. To try to change the world, to try to make God?s reign happen through wealth and prestige and power. That?s a very real temptation, one that confronts all of us. It certainly confronted Jesus.

Instead, Jesus had been asked to do it be giving himself over to suffering and death. Not to use power or force or violence. Not to accumulate wealth. But at this moment, as we hear in this account today, Jesus says, ?My soul is in distress.? The temptation is there again. The word that is used, is a word that describes a very profound, kind of internal shaking up of a person. He is in total turmoil within himself. He says, ?Shall I say God save me from this hour? Don?t let it happen. I don?t want to go this way.?

But then Jesus is strengthened and says, ?God, Glorify you name. This is why I have come to this hour, to face all this.? So Jesus resists the temptation.

In this case the people standing there, we heard, experience sound. Some think it?s thunder, but John tells us it?s

actually an angel speaking to Jesus, and then Jesus declaring, ?This voice did not come for my sake, but yours.? Jesus says, ?Now sentence is being passed on this world. Now the ruler of this world is to be cast down. The devil is definitively defeated though the actions of Jesus by following the way that God has pointed out for him.?

The other lessons for today help us understand how Jesus comes to this. In that letter to the Hebrews, the author tells us that Jesus was crying out, in desperation almost. He says, ?In those days Jesus offered his prayers with tears and cries. He prayed to the one who could save him from death. And although he was son of God, he learned through suffering what obedience was.?

Now that may seem a strange thing to us that somehow God would teach Jesus or any of us to obey through suffering. Yet what that word obedience means, it doesn?t mean subservience; the word obedience means to listen deeply. Jesus in the midst of his turmoil, his suffering, was listening deeply to what God was saying to him. Because Jesus knew the scriptures so well, when he was facing his death where he would pour forth his blood in a covenant, he could well have been mindful of the words that we heard in the first lesson today, where God says to the people that even though they have not been faithful to the covenant made under Moses, the covenant of the Ten Commandments written on stone. They were not faithful to that. But God speaks and says, I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people of Judea. Not like the one I made when their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant. This is the covenant. I will put my law within them, write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. God?s covenant, not written on stone tablets, but in the heart of every person so that if we go deeply into our own heart, we discover God speaking to us. If we obey, that is, if we listen, God will guide us, just as God guided Jesus.

So because Jesus would listen deeply, he could say as he does in the Gospel, no to this temptation once more and definitively reject Satan. The ruler of this world is cast down the new reign of God is now possible. Because this new covenant, Jesus declares. is in my blood. It is a covenant written in the hearts of every one us so we can be in touch with God ourselves immediately simply by going within our hearts.

The extraordinary thing about how when Jesus responds and accepts the way of God, which means the way of letting himself be tortured, that terrible shame, ignemy of the cross, the most cruel and most degrading kind of execution the Romans could devise. They used it only for the worst of criminals. Because Jesus gave himself over to that and returned love for that hatred that was imposed upon him, we hear him say, ?When I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw all people to myself.? You see, what Jesus is telling us is that you bring about the reign of God not through power and prestige and wealth. Not be forcing people, coercing people. Because he was willing to be lifted up, by which he means on the cross, and pour forth his love even upon those who were executing him. He showed us the new way that the reign of God can happen. Through love, our world can be transformed. And only through love.

As we reflect on this more and more deeply over the next two weeks, look upon Jesus crucified and understand that this new covenant in his blood is the covenant that can change our world, make the reign of God break forth so there will be truly abundance and fullness of life for every person. And peace of all of us.

As we reflect on this, we should turn to God in prayer. I hope. We should be doing this during these last two weeks of Lent. We can make this resolution as we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation today. We look at our sinfulness and be forgiven but then look at how we can be following Jesus.

I have a guide, I would call it, of how to do that. It is contained in a promise or a vow that has been promoted by Pax Christi, the Catholic peace movement. It really is a description of following the way of Jesus, the new covenant, where the values are proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes and all that Jesus said, ?You have heard it said of old but I say to you? and he shows how the old law is to be fulfilled according to the law of the Gospel. I will read this to you his morning and I ask you to reflect on it this week and even as we

celebrate the sacrament to guide us how we can live our life if we want to share in what Jesus did, rejecting Satan and following him. Here?s how it reads:

> Recognizing the violence in my own heart, yet trusting in the goodness and mercy of God, I promise to practice the nonviolence of Jesus who taught us in the Sermon on the Mount:
>
> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God ... You have learned how it was said, "You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy"; but I say to you, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you. In this way, you will be daughters and sons of God in heaven."
>
> And so I promise then based on that call from the Sermon on the Mount, to carry out in my life the love and example of Jesus [of Jesus lifted up]
>
> by striving for peace within myself and seeking to be a peacemaker in my daily life;
>
> by accepting suffering rather than inflicting it; [As Jesus did.]
>
> by refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence; [Do not respond to violence with violence.]
>
> by persevering in nonviolence of tongue and heart; [Sometimes very hard to do.]
>
> by living conscientiously and simply so that I do not deprive others of the means to live;
>
> by actively resisting evil and working nonviolently to abolish war and the causes of war from my own heart and from the face of the earth.

That is how we would follow Jesus. Live according to this pattern that is described for us in the Sermon on the Mount and that was lived out by Jesus during these last two weeks of his life, that culminated in his being lifted up. But because he responds with love, he draws all people to himself.

The reign of God will happen when all of us commit ourselves to the way of Jesus and follow it.

(This homily was preached at St. Hilary's Church in Detroit.)

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