NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Praying in the parish of Franz J?gerst?tter

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 10, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

First of all, it?s important for me this morning to say with how much gratitude I come here to the parish church of St. Radegund, the village [in Austria] from which Franz Jägerstätter went forth to give his life in witness to Jesus. I was able to be at his beatification last year when he was declared to be among the saints in heaven, one whom we now call blessed. It really is an honor to be here in this church with people from St. Radegund to be in the presence of the spirit of Franz Jägerstätter, and to celebrate the Eucharist with you.

As we try to listen to today?s scriptures, for me it?s very important to try to listen with an awareness of Franz Jägerstätter in our spirit, and to try to listen as we understand he might have listened to these scriptures. First of all, to me, it?s very clear that the miracle we hear about in today?s gospel is, in a way, a miracle that took place in the life of Franz, and one that can take place in our own lives.

We know that he was not one who was particularly devout in his early life; it was only later, after he was married and began to farm here earnestly, and later became sacristan of this parish church where he spent many hours praying as he was working, and many hours in the fields, praying, listening. In a way, I think God worked a miracle for him as God will do for any of us: He opened his ears so that he could truly hear God?s word, and then through the witness of his life, God enabled Franz to speak, not just to the people of this village, but to the world.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
James 2:1-5
Mark 7:31-37
Full text of the readings [1]

How do we go about listening to God?s word? How do we open our ears to hear? Well, first of all, it is very important to take passages like we heard today in the gospel and to look at what Jesus does, to listen to what he says, try to take it in, really hear this word, and if we do that today, we find a Jesus who is very compassionate. He?s outside the territory, the Promised Land, so he?s among people who would be looked down upon by most of the Jewish people because they were not the sons and daughters of God as the Jewish people thought of themselves who had entered into that covenant with God; they were pagans.

But Jesus didn?t let that stop him. This man was in need and Jesus took him apart from the crowd to give him some privacy and to care for him in a very personal and very intimate, very touching way. Jesus reaches out, touches the man?s ears, puts his fingers there, and then with spittle he touches his tongue and prays to God, and then says, ?Be opened,? and the man could hear, he could speak. Extraordinary.

But the thing to watch is not just what happened to the man, but how Jesus acted -- that compassionate, loving and kind Jesus -- who saw no barriers in reaching out when people were in need. He made no distinction of whether this is a Jew or a so-called pagan; it?s a human being. We hear how the first disciples picked up on that. In our second lesson today, James points out how sometimes in the Christian community at the time of James when that epistle was written, they were making distinctions. Those who were wealthy and well-dressed and so on got special places. Others were kind of put aside. That wasn?t the way of Jesus.

Those early disciples learned that, and if we listen, watch, hear what Jesus says and see how he acts, gradually we become compassionate and loving. Our ears are opened, our mouth is able to speak and we can hear what God does and proclaim this good news ourselves. But also as we listen to today?s scriptures, we discover

something else if we listen deeply as Franz did, that this Jesus, who was so loving, compassionate, gentle, respectful of people, is also the son of God.

Our first lesson today proclaimed a message of restoration of the Jewish people when they were in exile. God was going to change everything in that very marvelous way, which is described by Isaiah when he proclaims to the people at that time: ?Do not be afraid. Have courage, for God is coming, and when God comes, the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, the lame leap as a stag, the tongue of the mute sing and shout. Water will break out in the wilderness, streams gush forth from the desert. The thirsty ground will become a pool, the arid land springs of water.? Only God could do this. Isaiah says God is going to do this, the reign of God, symbolized by the return of the chosen people to be restored in their own place, in their own land. That?s the reign of God symbolized, and God will make this happen.

Mark, of course in the gospel, shows Jesus doing the very thing that God does so that helps us to see Jesus not only as the son of Mary -- kind, compassionate, like us in every way except sin -- but also Jesus who was son of God, and Franz more and more came to know this Jesus intimately, son of Mary, son of God. We too now as we listen and watch Jesus will have our ears opened and we too will be able to proclaim the good news about Jesus and about how he has come to restore the reign of God in its fullness.

As we listen and I hope, as we are transformed as Franz was through listening deeply to the Word of God, Jesus, we might also draw another very important lesson for ourselves today. Franz, as he listened to God?s word, came to understand that he could not participate in the evil of the Nazi regime. He could not become a soldier in Hitler?s army. He could not wage war on behalf of Hitler. He had to reject it, reject war, reject violence, and that?s something that we must listen to in a very special way at this period in human history.

The world in which Franz lived was a world of violence and hatred and killing and danger for all people, but the world in which we live today is even more a dangerous place with even greater destruction threatened through the weapons of mass destruction, through the way of total war that is waged today, but no war could ever be justified if anything could have happened that you could justify a war.

We must listen deeply to the way of Jesus. Remember last Sunday, Jesus said to the Pharisees, ?You built up human traditions and you imposed those on the people. That is wrong. Only follow what God teaches us.? One of the human traditions that we have built up in our church, it wasn?t there at the beginning. Not until the fourth century did we find ways to justify war, and we didn?t base that teaching on the scriptures; it?s based on philosophers? teachings, human teachings. It?s a human tradition. Jesus tells us not to listen and follow human traditions. ?Listen to God alone and follow God?s ways.?

Certainly, in our modern era, through our holy father, Pope John XXIII, telling us ?in our atomic era, it is irrational any longer to think of wars as an apt means to vindicate violated rights.? It?s irrational, it?s immoral even to think of war as a way of a Christian. Or Pope Paul VI telling us and telling the world at the United Nations, ?War never again. No more war, never again go to war.? We have to hear God speaking through the ministry of our church, recalling to us the most fundamental teaching of Jesus: ?You must love not only those who love you; love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you.? The Jesus who rejected violence for any reason whatsoever -- we must listen to him today. Reject the human traditions, follow only the profound way of God demonstrated and taught to us through Jesus.

You know, the miracle that Jesus worked in the gospel clearly has been worked in our world through Franz Jägerstätter. In his early life, he did not listen so deeply to God. By coming to know Jesus more deeply, he began to listen. His life was transformed. He became courageous, ready to follow Jesus even if it cost him his life, which it did, but also the miracle is demonstrated in this way: The Nazi authorities thought they could silence Franz, make him mute forever by executing him, but look what has happened. God has worked another miracle because now the voice of Franz, the witness of Franz, is there for the whole world.

Franz is not mute; his life has spoken a message that all the world can now hear, and it?s my prayer and hope that we here today, all of us who are present, will listen to that message proclaimed by Franz through the giving of his life, his witnessing to the teachings of Jesus. Let that voice of Franz, which God has brought forth for all the world to hear, let us hear it, be aware of his witness, say no to war, say yes only to justice, to peace, to love.

That is the call that we receive today as we listen to God?s word and to the witness to that word, given to us by Franz Jägerstätter, who lived in this village and who gave his life to witness to Jesus and the truth Jesus proclaims in our world. As we listen to that, and if we can have the courage to follow the way of Jesus as Franz did, we can end war, we can make a world where peace will prevail. I pray God that each of us will commit ourselves to listen deeply, and then to let our lives speak the truth of Jesus.

[**Editor?s Note:** There will not be homily from Bishop Gumbleton next week because he will be traveling to Iraq.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/090609.shtml