

Those disciples had to be very dense

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 22, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to today's gospel lesson, we might be excused if we think, 'Those disciples had to be very dense. They just could not understand what Jesus was telling them.' This is not the first time Jesus tells them about his death and resurrection; it's the third time, and each time, the disciples totally misunderstand or in a sense, reject what he's saying.

It goes back just before Jesus started this last journey of his life to Jerusalem and you probably remember this gospel lesson from a few weeks ago because it's so dramatic.

Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" and after some questioning and so on, Peter says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, because only God would have revealed this to you."

And then Jesus says, because he tries to make sure they don't misunderstand what it means that he's the son of God, the Christ, son of the living God, he makes the first prediction of his passionate death, he says, "Yes, now we're on the way to Jerusalem and there, they'll hand me over to my enemies and put me to death."

Peter, as you may remember, says, "No, no, that can't be. You just claimed you're the anointed one, the son of the living God. How could you be handed over to death? Why would you ever let that happen to you?" Remember what Jesus did then? He said, "Peter, you Satan, get behind me!" Peter, I suppose, must have very meekly kind of got at the end of the line and just started to walk after Jesus.

You see, [Full text of the readings \[1\]](#) ~~totally misunderstanding, not accepting~~ that Jesus was really going to be one who would let himself be tortured and put to death, and not use violence or force to resist his enemies, only love them.

And he tells them at that point, "Look, if you really want to be my disciple, you must deny your very self, take up your cross, accept suffering in your life, let it change you, follow me." This is a little bit further on in the gospel of Mark -- after Jesus has made the second prediction of his death -- Mark says Jesus was walking on ahead and the others were behind following him and when they get to the house where they're going to stay, Jesus says to them, "What were you talking about on the way?" They're very embarrassed and don't want to tell him because they were talking about who's going to be the greatest when Jesus comes into his glory? who is going to be the greatest?

That time, Jesus tries to impress upon them, "Look, my followers don't seek the highest places. They don't want to be the greatest, the most powerful, the way the world treats the great and wants people to be great and powerful." He takes a small child and places that child right in the midst of them: "If you want to enter into the reign of God, you have to become like this little child, vulnerable, open, ready to receive God's gifts, not one who dominates or has power," if you really want to follow Jesus.

But then again today, the same thing happens. Jesus tells about his death and resurrection, describes it in detail, "Look, they're going to spit on me, they're going to mock me, they're going to scourge me, they're going to

execute me, kill me, and I'm only going to respond with love. If you want to follow me, then this is how you must be also."

Then we hear what James and John do. They totally don't understand. They're still looking, "I want a place at your right hand," and the other one wants the place at the left hand.

Jesus says, "OK, that's the way it is in the world, but we're going to transform the world to the reign of God, and in God's reign, there is no left or right places of power." The only way to enter into the reign of God is to be like the Son of Man, who will give himself over to his enemies and love in response. Pour forth love because "The Son of Man," Jesus says, "has come not to be served, but to serve and to give his very life in order to free others," free them from oppression, from tyranny, even from death, by pouring forth God's love into the world in response to what is being done to him.

Sooner or later, it surely took some time, but those first disciples did get it, finally, and they began to spread this message of Jesus, began to live according to the way Jesus taught them.

That message of Jesus has come down now for 2,000 years and is presented to us this morning. It's easy for us to say, "Well, how dense those disciples were. Why didn't they understand? Why didn't they accept what he was saying?" Now it's time for us to ask: How well have I accepted what Jesus is saying? Am I really ready to become the servant, even the slave, as Jesus puts it, of all? Or am I still trying to dominate, be in charge, be the one who controls? That's the way of the world.

But it's amazing, isn't it? And yet how hard it is for some of us to accept this. Look at all the controversy about President Obama getting the Nobel Peace award. People are saying, "What did he do to deserve that?" Well, as the people who handed out the award said, "He's changed the climate, because he's trying to lead your nation, not in a way of arrogance and dominance and power over other nations, but with respect and an openness to others." What a marvelous thing that is and yet many of us, I'm sure, find it difficult to accept that. Don't we still have to be the most powerful nation in the world?number one? The answer is no, if we follow the way of Jesus.

So we should be supporting that kind of effort within our nation and trying to make peace happen by reaching out. Instead of going into Afghanistan with warriors, go with resources so they can rebuild their nation. Stop using drone airplanes that only kill mostly civilians and make them hate us even more. Carry this out. President Obama has at least generated the spirit of accommodation and respect for others, but now put it into action. That's what I hope our president will do, and what we should be trying to support him to do because isn't this exactly what Jesus was talking about?

It's hard for us to accept the way of Jesus as a nation, and also as individuals, so each of us also has to look into our hearts: How willing am I really to be the servant of others? How often do I come here and help serve the meal that we provide for those who are homeless and helpless and poverty stricken? Am I really ready to be the one who serves? Our parish does it, but do I? And other ways -- there are so many different ways in which we can reach out and be the servant of others. It's up to each of us to look into my own heart and see what my attitude is. Am I continuing to be dense, like those first disciples, and not really ready to accept the way of Jesus?

As we heard in the first lesson, God proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah that all of those people who had suffered for so long, through their suffering they were healed and they were being restored now to the Promised Land, to their own land.

See, God can bring good out of evil; God can bring good out of suffering and pain if we accept this way of Jesus -- "take up your cross and follow me." Each of us must try to do that.

One other thing people might say as we listen to the lessons today, "But look, he was the son of God. Certainly

it's possible for him," and yet as we heard in our second lesson, Jesus was like us in every way, "tempted," the writer says, "as we are." Surely he was tempted to use power and force and dominate, but he didn't. In his humanness, he was like us, and he accepted the way that God had led him. So we cannot say, "Well, because he's god, he can do it," no; he was like us in every way.

So perhaps what we need to do as we reflect on these readings today is to reflect deeply and join ourselves closely with Jesus. Not as son of God, but as Son of Man, one like us in every way except sin. As we are united with him in his humanness, he will help us to overcome our weaknesses and failures and enable us to follow him in the way that God led him, to pour forth love upon this world, even in response to hatred and violence, to bring healing and peace.

That is the way of Jesus in his humanness and as son of God, and if we unite ourselves with him in our prayer, he will help us to follow him faithfully and help to bring about the reign of God in our world.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Leo's Church in Detroit, Mi.]

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