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We're bound together in one communion

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 6, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

We celebrate this weekend and tomorrow, Monday, the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls. We celebrate these two feasts together because there is a deep connection between them, the feasts, and those we celebrate in these feasts and ourselves. When we think of these feasts of course, we have to be mindful of death, the death of those whom we loved and have gone before us into everlasting life, and our own death.

But if we enter deeply into the scriptures of today and into the meaning of these feasts, we discover what we proclaim when we celebrate a funeral Mass, and I'm sure all of us are always affected by these words and the preface to the Eucharistic prayer at a funeral Mass, where we proclaim: "For those who believe, life is changed, not ended."

These feast days remind us that even though many untold numbers of people have gone before us into everlasting life, and many close to us have gone before us, we still find consolation, especially in these feast days, because they are based on one of the most consoling teachings of our church, what we call the Communion of Saints, or what the author to the letter of Hebrews called "that cloud of witnesses," or those we hear about in today's first lesson, that untold multitude, impossible to count from every nation, race, people and tongue, those standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed in white with palm branches in their hands as they cry out in great joy and praise and glory of God, all of those that the author of the book of Revelation speaks about, are in communion with us.

Solemnity of All Saints
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14
Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12
Full text of the readings
[1]

I'm sure we're all aware that in our teaching within the church, we think of our relationship to God and the church in three stages. There are those of us who are still in a pilgrim church, on the way; but those who are in a state of being purified, how long or how, we have no idea; but those also who are in that state of glory, exalting in the victory over evil, sin and death.

We're bound together in one communion because of our baptism, and even as we celebrate together today this Eucharist, that union is deepened because through baptism and through the new life we received in the Eucharist or the strengthening of the life of Jesus we receive in the Eucharist, we're all bound together with that same life of Jesus, the son of God?a bond that cannot be broken. It's a very deep communion of life that we share, so even those that have gone before us are still with us. We're united with them in this marvelous Communion of Saints, as we call it.

So that is why we can rejoice as we celebrate today those who have gone before us into everlasting life because we know, as we heard in our second lesson today, "Beloved, we are God's children. What we shall be has not yet been shown, yet when Jesus appears in his glory, we know that we shall be like him, for then we shall see him as he is, son of God in glory." There are so many ways in which the scriptures reassure us that even though life after death is a mystery to us, still it's a blessing.

Thousands of years ago, the author of the book of Wisdom in the Old Testament, reflecting on those who have died said "The souls of the just are in the hands of God. No torment shall touch them." None of that suffering, torment, evil that we experience in this life of pilgrimage can touch those who have gone before us. "In the eyes

of the unwise they appear to be dead. Their going is held as a disaster. It seems that they lose everything by departing from us, but they are in peace. They are in peace, have entered into the fullness of life God has prepared for every creature." So these feasts are feasts that bring us consolation and joy.

And it's important for us to continue to reflect on the reality of our dying, and those who have gone before us, and reflect on it, but with confidence and with trust, looking forward to the day when we too will experience that fullness of life that God has prepared for us. But now, it's important also, and maybe this is the most important thing we must carry away from today's liturgy, the gospel lesson. Matthew describes Jesus at the beginning of his public life going up on the mountainside, sitting down and teaching his disciples, those crowds that were following him.

Matthew chooses this context, the mountainside, very deliberately because he is making clear that Jesus is now the new Moses. When God revealed to Moses the Torah, the Law, Moses went up the mountainside at Sinai and then brought that message of God back to the people. So Jesus is the new Moses, the one who now brings God's message to us?the way we are to live, the new covenant. "Blessed are the poor. Theirs is the reign of God." And of course, Matthew goes on to continue what we call the beatitudes, and we listen to all of them carefully, but the point that's important for us right now is what happens when we follow these values of Jesus. The reign of God is ours.

I think most of us always think of entering into the reign of God as something that happens to us after we die, but it's very clear, when you listen to the scriptures, that the reign of God, as Jesus said it in the beginning of Mark's gospel, first begins to preach: "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives." It's at hand, it's breaking forth, or ready to break forth in your life, if you change your life. There's another very consoling passage in John's gospel that makes the same point. We've heard this at funeral Masses, I'm sure, the story of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, that family that Jesus was so close to where he would go and visit. Lazarus died and Jesus wasn't there.

When he comes a couple days later, Martha says to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha says, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day." Then Jesus says those words that we must listen to carefully: "I am the resurrection." It's not the last day, "I am the resurrection. Whoever believes in me, though that person dies, shall live. Whoever is alive by believing in me will never die." You enter into the reign of God right now by believing in Jesus, accepting what he says, following his way. That is where these beatitudes are so important, and this whole Sermon on the Mount, as we call it, "Blessed are the poor," the reign of God is theirs.

Think of last Sunday's gospel. Bartimaeus, that poor, blind beggar, who cried out to Jesus, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!" and the crowd tried to quiet him down and push him away and he cries a little louder. Finally Jesus hears and says, "Bring him to me," so the crowd says, "He's calling you," and Bartimaeus immediately throws off his cloak?everything he owns, he lets go of?and goes to follow Jesus. After Jesus gives him his sight, Mark tells us that he follows Jesus on the way. The reign of God is his right then.

The reign of God isn't a place; we can't think of it as a place. It's our relationship to God and how God enters deeply into our life, how God is effective in my life right now. We need only to open ourselves to God, follow the way of Jesus, and we're within God's reign, that relationship that beings to bring to us the fullness of God's life. So that's why these beatitudes are so marvelous. If we live gently, nurturing others, not trying to dominate, then too the reign of God is ours. We hunger and thirst for justice. We try to make sure that everyone has a full human life, they have everything they need for that full human life.

Those six basic needs that every person has, we try to make sure that for every person, those needs are satisfied?food, water, clothing, shelter, health care, education?everyone has a right to those. We hunger and thirst and try to make that happen with all the energy we have. The reign of God is ours when we do that. We're

connected with God. We enter into a relationship, deeper and deeper, with God and go right through these beatitudes, those who work for justice, end violence and killing, work for peace, end war. Those who do that are the sons and daughters of God. What deeper relationship could we have than being a son or daughter of God? That's how the reign of God becomes full in our lives. And even when we are insulted or persecuted, we accept that suffering, uniting it with the suffering of Jesus, who was rejected, persecuted, executed. The more deeply we're united with him, the more deeply we are related to God and the reign of God is ours.

As you know, these beatitudes are only the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus goes on to say, and it's so clear, he's trying to bring us beyond the Ten Commandments, bring us beyond those into the reign of God: "You've heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say to you, you must not even have anger in your heart toward your brother or sister. Even if you're coming to the altar to offer your gift and there you remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the alter. Go first and be reconciled. Only then come and offer your gift." Reconciliation, no vengeance, no revenge, only reaching out to forgive, to love.

"You've heard that it was said of old, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' I say to you, offer no such resistance to evil." Don't destroy an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. No; reconciliation, healing. "You've heard that it was said of old, 'Love your neighbor, hate your enemy.'" You see, Jesus keeps making this more specific, more radical, and obviously more difficult: "Don't just love those who love you, love your enemy, do good to the one who hurts you." This is how we will be those who work for peace, who work for justice. These are the values that Jesus proclaims, asks us to follow so that we might enter into the reign of God right now.

And if we do, then as Jesus, in that very intimate conversation he had with his disciples at the last Passover that he celebrated with them, what we call the Last Supper, in John's gospel you'll find chapter 14, 15, 16, 17?this long discourse or conversation Jesus had with his disciples, where he says, among so many other beautiful things, "Peace be with you. I give you my peace. Not as the world gives peace do I give it to you." See, what would be a false peace, an absence of conflict for a moment, that's not peace; peace is much deeper. "Do not be afraid, do not be troubled," my peace takes away fear, takes away being troubled, being upset, being filled with worry. Peace, serenity, that's what I give to you when you enter into the reign of God. Or as Jesus said at another point in that conversation, "I've told you all this so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete," deep peace, deep joy, fullness of life.

That is what begins to happen to us even now when we follow the way of Jesus. The reign of God is ours now. Yes, there will be a fullness of that reign when we enter into the fullness of God's life, when we pass through death, when life for us is changed, not ended. But even now, the reign of God is ours. I hope we leave this church today aware that the reign of God is at hand. All we need do is open ourselves to it, follow the way of Jesus, and God will enter more and more deeply into our lives, and we will know that peace and joy, that fullness of life Jesus promises.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, Mich.]

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