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The call of Jesus demands a choice

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 29, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily to the Confirmation class at St. Mark's Parish in Warren, Mich.

When I am a confirmed Christian, it's not for a few moments or an hour or so, it's the rest of my life. So that's what you're doing this morning -- you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying, "Yes, I want to be his disciple and follow him, live according to his ways, to his example; to listen to his words, take them in and act on them." That's what it means when you say, "Yes, I want to be confirmed."

So this morning then, we might ask ourselves: What do we learn about following Jesus, being a disciple of Jesus, as we listen to today's readings? Do they help us to know what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, a confirmed Christian? I think they really do, very clearly.

First of all, in the gospel lesson, what does Jesus tell us? "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. They listen and they follow me." That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus then -- to listen to Jesus, to listen to what he says in the gospels, to look at his example, the values that he spoke about, but even more the values that he lived, and then to follow him. When you say yes to Jesus, "I want to be your disciple," you're saying, "Yes, I will follow you."

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 13:14, 43-52

Psalm 100:1-2, 3, 5

Revelation 7:9, 14b-17

John 10:27-30

Full text of the readings

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And if we turn to the first lesson today, that incident from the Acts of the Apostles, we discover that it's not just Jesus of the gospels that we listen to, we listen to the spirit of the living Jesus, who lives in my spirit and my heart, who lives among us, the spirit we discover in one another. We listen to what is happening around us. That's what Paul was doing. This might not be so apparent to us, unless we remember, that Jesus never went outside of his own land while he was on earth. He preached only to Jewish people, to his own people; he refused to go elsewhere. And in the beginning of the church, the first disciples continued to go to the temple all the time and the first Christians were all Jews, following the whole Jewish Law.

Now, in this incident today, we discover Paul listening to the living Jesus, who said, "No, we can't just confine ourselves to the Jewish people; God is telling us, 'Go, spread the word everywhere. Be a light to all the nations.' " so Paul was listening to Jesus, and so he changed what he was doing. He had been going only to the synagogues and preaching only to the Jews as Jesus had done, but now God, living through the spirit of Jesus, and he listening to that, we go beyond, we change things. We have to act differently.

I think if we listen to what is happening in our world today, and if we also try to listen to Jesus speaking to us through the events that are happening in our world, Jesus will guide us, but it's very important for us to follow where he leads us. I think of three things today that are very important things happening in our world, where I am confident Jesus is speaking to us and will give us guidance if we only listen.

There is a terrible tragedy happening in our church and I doubt that anyone here is not aware, and it's actually a worldwide phenomenon -- the abuse that has happened against children in our church.

I speak from experience -- I was abused. It took a long, long time before I would ever speak about it and that's the situation of almost all of the victims. They have not been able to speak about it, and then sometimes when

they do, they've been dismissed; nobody's been listening. And even now, the response of our church is not adequate. I have to say that with great sadness. So if we're listening, I think Jesus is telling us there has to be much more openness; there has to be a deep probing into what were the reasons why all of this would happen and would go on for so long, but I don't [discover really yet] that we've listened adequately. So in this case, I hope that we will, all of us, try to listen ourselves, but pray that the leaders of our church will be open to listening because very profound changes need to happen within the church in order for us to really heal ourselves of what some people have called a terrible cancer within the body of the church. We must listen to Jesus, and the living Jesus who speaks to us now.

Another way in which we listen to Jesus -- I'm reminded of this because this past week, April 22, we celebrated Earth Day. I think God has been speaking to us about what we've been doing to our planet and it's wrong; we've been destroying our planet. Even if you look back in the gospels, you discover a Jesus who cared about the earth. How often did he speak in parables about farmers sowing seeds, the seed falling into the ground, dying so it could break forth into new life? Jesus was close to the earth; how he praised the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. He loved nature -- you could tell that. I think Jesus is still speaking to us about our planet and what a beautiful planet it is, but how many ways we've damaged it. Some of them will be irreparable perhaps, but if we listen to Jesus now, guiding us, maybe the whole environmental movement will take a great surge forward, because it will be inspired not just by our human reasoning, but by the spirit of Jesus urging us to have the same love for this world that he has for it.

Finally, one other very important thing that I think Jesus is speaking to us about today, and maybe the most important thing, and that is about how we overcome the terrible violence that goes on in our world, the violence, most of all, of war. That violence, of course, brings great destruction. It has in the wars we've been engaged in and are engaged in right now in Iraq -- the hundreds of thousands of people, the damage to the land -- in Afghanistan. But what's even worse in some ways, the damage it does to those who wage the war. We've had tens of thousands of troops come back damaged psychologically. There's a higher suicide rate for Vietnam veterans and Iraqi veterans than there has ever been in the history of our nation because they've been psychologically damaged.

In fact, this past week, there was another anniversary, April 19, when 15 years ago, a young man who actually grew up in Michigan, who was a Catholic, in fact, Timothy McVeigh, blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killed 162 people, many of them children. Do you know one of the things he said? HE was a veteran of the First Persian Gulf War. He said, "I became a killer and I never got over it." He's been executed since, but what a tragedy to him, but certainly even more, to those families that suffered. And Jesus has been speaking to us about this from when he was on earth. Remember in the garden when they wanted to arrest him and Peter tried to defend him? "You're not going to take Jesus," and he took out his sword and Jesus said, "Put it away." When Peter struck the servant of the high priest and wounded him, Jesus healed him, said no to violence.

Perhaps Jesus has been speaking to us about war. This is something we find hard because we're so used to it and accept it as it just has to be a way of life, but it doesn't. Back in 1965, I think Jesus was speaking powerfully through Pope Paul VI, when Paul VI went to the United Nations and pleaded, with tears in his eyes, "No to war. Never again war." And then John Paul II on the occasion of the first Persian Gulf war repeated that cry, "No to war. Never again war," because it destroys the lives of innocent people, throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing, and always leaves behind a trail of hatred and resentment, and that's true. Couldn't Jesus be speaking to us through those popes, through the wisdom of our own hearts, if we really look at what happens at war: the waste of our resources, the waste of lives, the damage to people, physical wounds, psychological wounds? Surely Jesus is speaking to us, but we as disciples have to listen.

I say this to these young people today, even though it's a very serious and perhaps it might seem something that's way beyond what you should have to worry about, but it really isn't. Back in 2000, the beginning of this

new millennium, Pope John Paul II went to the Holy Land. He thought that would be a marvelous place to begin the new millennium in the year 2000, and one of the places he went was to what we call the Mount of the Beatitudes, that place that's described in the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus went up on the hillside, sat down, looked over a huge crowd, and began to preach to them. He said, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the gentle, blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, blessed are the peace makers," and so on. He gave that beautiful sermon we call the Sermon on the Mount.

John Paul went there and read that first part, and then he reflected on it. Here's part of what he said: "Understanding what Jesus was saying was a call to follow him," and Pope John Paul says, "Jesus' call has always demanded a choice between the two voices competing for your hearts." John Paul said, "Even now on this hill, right now the call of Jesus demands a choice." We could say even now in this church, the call of Jesus demands a choice, the choice between good and evil, between life and death. Then this is something that John Paul often did -- he had a special place in his heart for young people so he spoke to them often -- and at this point, he says, "Which voice will the young people of the 21st century choose to follow?"

It makes a huge difference which choice the young people (and he was talking to young people like you) choose to follow, which voice. To put your faith in Jesus means choosing to believe what Jesus says, no matter how strange it may seem, and choose to reject the claims of evil, no matter how sensible and attractive they may seem. Sometimes what Jesus tells us, either in the gospels or through his life or through his spirit right now, might not seem sensible to many people, but as St. Paul says in writing to the church at Corinth, "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." So when Jesus calls us to give up violence, to give up war, it may not seem sensible, but it is the wisdom of God.

I hope that as we celebrate this sacrament of Confirmation this morning (in fact, I urge all of us who are here today), when I get to the point in the ceremony and I ask you to pray for these candidates, I ask you to pray for them with great fervor. Ask God to send the Holy Spirit upon them, to strengthen them in their faith and to anoint each of them to be more like Jesus. Make that prayer very fervently, but then pray for us too -- we've already been confirmed -- that we renew our willingness to listen to Jesus so that as we're all filled with the holy spirit today, we'll leave the church ready to go back out into our world to really make a difference, to transform our world, to carry the message of Jesus, to be the witness of Jesus even to the ends of the earth. That is what can happen if we open ourselves this morning to the coming of the Holy Spirit, commit ourselves to listen to that spirit of Jesus today and for the rest of our lives.

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