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We don't have to abandon the church

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 13, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

In this homily from the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton talks about an early controversy in the church and how Paul confronted Peter. It's a good lesson for us today, Gumbleton says. "We get a little shocked, I think, when we hear about dissension within our church today, but it was there from the beginning, and do you know why? It's because Jesus never gave a plan." A full transcript of the homily follows.

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We sometimes forget, I think, but it's very important that we should be aware, how the lessons from one week to another continue to build up the message of Jesus and help us to get a deeper understanding sometimes of what we've heard before. So I thought it might be important at the beginning today, to remind us more thoroughly about what we listened to last week when God spoke to us.

First, that beautiful passage from the book of the Apocalypse, when John, this prophet who is exiled on the island of Patmos, toward the end of the long prophecy that we call the book of the Apocalypse, describes for us what will happen when our world has been transformed so that it really is the reign of God.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29

Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23

John 14:23-29

Full text of the readings [1]

John says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I saw the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down from God out of heaven and a loud voice came from the throne, 'Here is the dwelling of God among people. God will pitch God's tent among them. They will God's people and God will be with them, wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was has passed away.' "

In the passage today, we hear about the New Jerusalem, and the most important part, I think, is at the end, where John says, "I saw a new temple in the city, for God, the Maker of the universe and the Lamb, Jesus, are themselves the temple. The city has no need of the light of the sun or the moon since God's glory is its light, and Jesus is its Lamb."

How will all of that happen? Well, last week in the gospel, Jesus, I sense, almost pleaded with us: "My one commandment, love one another as I have loved you." If only we could do that, chose to do that, how different our world would be, how different everything would be.

Today, we move on with the gospel, where again, Jesus reemphasizes how we must love one another and if we draw from the incident in the Acts of the Apostles, we will see that what we have to try to do now is specify our love in a way that will enable us to settle disputes peacefully. I'm thinking not only about disputes like among nations or disputes within our families or in our relationships with others, but within the church. We live in a time when there's much concern within the church throughout the world. It's come to kind of a climax because of the terrible abuse crisis that we've been dealing with now in a very open way for the last 15 years or so, but that's not something new.

This is what we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, and what we heard today was how the whole community of disciples settled a dispute, but we might not have a sense of how much of a crisis it was in the church. The dispute was over whether, if you were going to be a disciple of Jesus, you had to first become a full, practicing Jew, abide by the whole Jewish Law. We probably do not advert to this very often, but we should remember that when the first disciples began to live as disciples of Jesus after his death and resurrection, they never broke from the synagogue. They continued to follow the Jewish Law and they went to the temple on a regular basis.

They were really still practicing Jews, but Jews who had come to know God in Jesus, and who had experienced Jesus among them, and then as the Son of God in power after his resurrection. But then Paul began to go and preach among the Gentiles (the non-Jews) and welcome them in to the church without their first becoming Jews. Then he comes back to Jerusalem to report to the church in Jerusalem all that's been happening. We heard, in the last couple of weeks, about his travels through what we call Asia Minor, Turkey and Syria, in that area. He had such great success that people were flocking to become members of the community of disciples of Jesus and Paul was allowing them to do this without first become Jews.

Now when he comes back to Jerusalem, we hear in the Acts of the Apostles that some Pharisees, some leaders among the Jewish community who were Christian, came into the assembly and began to denounce Paul. We don't hear all of that described in the lessons, but that's what was happening. In fact, this has been a very tense crisis in the church. Paul recounts some of it when he writes a letter to the Galatians, and this may shock us in a way, but listen, "When Peter came to Antioch, I confronted him because he deserved to be blamed." Peter, was what we would call today the pope. We can hardly imagine someone standing up and saying this to the pope, "I confronted him because he deserved to be blamed because before some of James' kinsman (James the apostle, who was now bishop of Jerusalem), before some of them arrived, Peter used to eat with non-Jewish people," which was against the Law, but Peter was doing it.

"But then when they arrived, he withdrew and did not mingle anymore with them for fear of these circumcised people. The rest of the Jews followed Peter in this pretense, this hypocrisy." That's what Paul was saying -- they were being hypocrites. Even Barnabas was part of this double dealing. These are pretty harsh words. "When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter publicly, 'If you who are Jewish agree to live like the non-Jews, setting aside the Jewish customs, why do you now compel the non-Jews to live like Jews?'" So this dispute was very deep among the very leaders of the church and verbally they were attacking one another.

We get a little shocked, I think, when we hear about dissention within our church today, but it was there from the beginning, and do you know why? It's because Jesus never gave a plan. I think many of us presume that the way we know the church today is something Jesus had designed and he set it all up this way, and all we had to do after Jesus left was to carry out his plan, but there was no plan. Instead, what Jesus promised them is what we heard in today's gospel when he tells them, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments and God will love you," and then goes on to tell them, "I tell you all this while I am still with you, that from now on the holy spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you all things." You have to be open to the spirit -- that's what Jesus is telling his disciples.

If we go on into the next chapter, he even says, "I have many new things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now." He's talking to them at the Last Supper. He's saying, "I have a lot of things I could tell you, but you're not ready for them. But when the spirit of truth comes, the spirit will guide you into the whole truth." So Jesus left it up to his disciples, the whole community of disciples, to continue to listen to the spirit and to follow where the spirit leads. There's no overall plan, there's no design; all we have to do is fit ourselves into it -- no. And if we look back at the history of the church, we discover that we have had to listen to the spirit at various times in some very important issues.

For example, for a long time within the church, people had slaves, even up into modern time. Now we would not think of that as possible, would we, that a Christian, a follower of Jesus, would have slaves, own people like property? No, we have listen to the spirit and we've changed in the church. Or the death penalty -- up until very recently, practically until John Paul II, most Catholic Christians accepted the death penalty, but now most Christians -- mostly because of the leadership of John Paul -- say no to the death penalty. You don't solve any problem by killing someone in retaliation -- if someone has killed, you kill them. Well, you only add one more killing to the violence that goes on in our world. We now have this insight better than we ever did before. We listen to the spirit and we change.

The things that are causing distress in our church right now -- we need not be overly concerned and upset. So many people (I think I've mentioned this before) in our own country, 10 percent of the people in the United States, are former Catholics. Thirty million people have given up on the church and many of us maybe at times are tempted to give up -- too much squabbling, too much controversy, that sort of thing; the terrible way we've handled the abuse crisis in the church. We've lost our sense of confidence in the leadership in the church and we're all upset by that. But it's part of being the community of disciples of Jesus. When Jesus left behind his community, it was not a perfect community from the very beginning, it was not a community who knew all the answers to all of the problems that they were going to face. No; it had to be a community open to the Holy Spirit, and listening to hear what God is saying.

So with the crises that we face today, one very real, and it's one that is a development taking place in the world around us, and that is full equality of women in our world and in our church. It causes a lot of controversy. What we need to do is to listen, let the Holy Spirit speak through us and through those women who hear a call to minister within the church. Listen -- the spirit could be speaking through them. Or the whole questions revolving around sexuality, what it means and how you live healthy lives as full sexual beings, heterosexual or homosexual. This is a big controversy, again, in the church. We need to listen to the spirit, to follow where the spirit leads.

It's in the passage from the Acts today, but we might not have been so keenly aware of it, the first thing that those disciples did when they gathered together: They listened to the experiences of one another. Peter spoke about his experience, what happened as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 10, where Peter goes to the home of Cornelius, a pagan. He eats with him and then notices the spirit coming down upon Cornelius and his household. He baptizes them without their become Jews. Peter shares this experience. Paul shares his experience, going out among the Gentiles and preaching the word of God, proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God in power, and people are attracted to the message and they follow it. So they shared their experience and then they discuss it, they come to a consensus.

Then at the end of the passage today, Paul and Barnabas are sent back with a letter outlining how we've resolved this crisis. It comes from listening to the spirit, listening to one another, and most of all, the command that Jesus gave us last week, loving one another "as I have loved you." If we can begin to do that in our church now more fully and faithfully than we have, well then we will get through this time of crisis. We won't have to abandon the church. If you're tempted, say, "I give up," no, don't; we really have to simply face the reality that God did not tell everything to us through Jesus when he was here on earth. He left it open for us to discover how to follow the way of Jesus.

And if we commit ourselves to that, and each of us in our own heart try to listen to the spirit, and we as a community listen to the spirit, we're open to one another, we share with one another our experiences, we can come to a consensus and to peace. So then once more, because it's so beautiful, hear what could happen: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I saw the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down from God and a loud voice came from the throne, 'Here is the dwelling

of God among people. God pitches God's tent among them. They will God's people and God will be with them, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was has passed away."

Then there's no temple in the city, for God, Maker of the universe and Jesus are themselves its temple, and in the light of God and the light of Jesus, we discover the way of God, we discover how to follow Jesus and we discover how we will experience what Jesus promised in the gospel today -- "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you, not as the world gives it; I give it in a way that will never depart from you." We will have that peace if we try to listen to the spirit among us.

[This homily was given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich.]

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