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

Being a believing people

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 20, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

I?m sure that all of us have seen stained-glass windows perhaps, or holy cards in which we are given a picture of what St. Luke described in the first lesson today -- the disciples all crowding around and Jesus going up slowly and disappearing into the heavens. We remember that so vividly because St. Luke is such a good storyteller. He makes everything so vivid and so clear. We have most of our images about Jesus at the time of his birth from St. Luke?s gospel, and we remember all of those very easily also. We remember the times in Luke?s gospel where he describes Jesus in such human ways -- weeping, being with friends whom he loved, and so on.

The Ascension of the Lord
Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 1:17-23
Luke 24:46-53
Full text of the readings
[1]

But the events that are described at the ascension of Jesus in Luke?s gospel, we find nowhere else in the scriptures; or rather in the Acts of the Apostles, the way Luke describes the ascension. Even in his own gospel, which we just heard, he says, ?And as he blessed them, he withdrew and they worshipped him,? simply withdrew, as in the other gospels, there are so many times Jesus appears to them and then he withdraws, he?s gone. My concern is that sometimes when we have the picture spelled out so vividly and so explicitly, we really miss the underlying teaching that the gospel writer like Luke, in writing the Acts of the Apostles, is trying to convey to us. We get all caught up in the strangeness of Jesus slowly rising up into heaven and disappearing, but we really miss the reality of the religious teaching.

There are two things especially that we should draw from this Feast of the Ascension, and the first is what we proclaim in the Eucharistic prayer, when we celebrate our Eucharist. There?s one part of it where we say, ?Jesus now lives with you in glory,? with God in glory, ?but he is also here on earth among us.? Jesus isn?t really gone, disappearing up into the sky; Jesus is alive and among us. And that?s why perhaps in the account in the Acts that we heard, Luke tells the story vividly and we see him disappearing, but then the angels are there and say, ?Why are you looking up? Why? He?s not really gone. You?re not going to find him there. He?s alive and he?s among us.? That?s the reality. Jesus now lives with God in glory, but he is also here on earth among us.

In a way, I suppose, it?s easier for us to think of Jesus having disappeared off into the heavens than to look at one another and say, ?I find Jesus in this person or that person, or even in the person who has hurt me.? Jesus lives among us and we really have to try to recognize that and have profound respect for every person, all of creation, because Jesus is here sanctifying each of us, sanctifying our world, our planet, sanctifying all of creation. That?s the truth that challenges us, not a phenomenon of Jesus, floating up into the sky. Jesus now lives with God in glory, but he is also here on earth among us, and it?s our task to discover Jesus every day, wherever we go, see Jesus living in our midst and responding to Jesus living in our midst.

Then the second truth of today?s feast that is so important is perhaps given to us more clearly in Matthew?s gospel, where Matthew doesn?t talk about Jesus rising up into heaven, but he simply takes the disciples out to the hill of Bethany, and he says to them, ?I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, make disciples of all nations.? Jesus gives us a mission. In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke says, ?You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, even to the ends of the earth,? so this Jesus who lives with God in glory, but who is also here on earth, has given us the charge to be witnesses to him, to all that he

taught, to everything he dramatized in his life, all the goodness that he demonstrated. We have to be witnesses to that.

I had a blessing recently of seeing people truly witnessing to Jesus. It?s when I was in Haiti, and you are all aware of how terrible the devastation was there in Haiti and how much suffering there was, how many people were killed and people terribly injured. But the day after that earthquake happened, some friends of mine who were there and whom I joined later described how they went into the heart of the city of Port-au-Prince. Here?s how the person who wrote this describes it. She says, ?This evening, feeling helpless, we decided to take a van down to Champs Mars,? which is the main square in front of the presidential palace and right next to the cathedral.

She said, ?We took a van down to Champs Mars to look for people needing medical care to bring them back to the guesthouse where we are staying which has been transformed into a field hospital. Since we arrived in Port-au-Prince, everyone has told us, ?You cannot go into that area around the palace because of violence and insecurity.? See it was teeming with thousands of people who were homeless because of the earthquake. But she says, ?I was in awe as we walked into downtown, among the flattened buildings, in the shadow of the fallen palace, amongst the swarms of displaced people, there was calm and solidarity. We wound our way through the camp, asking for injured people who needed to get to the hospital.

?Despite the fact that everyone had told us that as soon as we did this, we would be mobbed by people, I was amazed as we approached each tent, people gently pointed us toward their neighbors, guiding us to those who were suffering the most. We picked up five badly injured people and drove them back to the hospitality house and the field hospital and there they received the help that they needed.? Truly this is witnessing to the way of Jesus. These people who were suffering so much, many of whom needed help, but they always pointed to someone else who needed it more. That?s following the example of Jesus, who tells us to love one another. It?s carrying out the message of today?s feast. In those people suffering the most, Jesus is suffering, so by taking them back, they?re witnessing to Jesus and they?re also ministering to Jesus, living in the suffering.

The other thing that impressed me so much when I was there was how these people, suffering this dramatic trauma of the earthquake and all that came from it. I was staying in a place, this house of hospitality, and next to it, part of the property, was a huge soccer field, and this is where that field hospital was. There were about 1,500 people there, not all needing medical care, but just sleeping on the ground, and every morning, as I woke up, I woke up the singing of hymns. In spite of their suffering, in spite of all that happened, these people showed a tremendous faith in God and God?s presence among them. Every morning, someone would begin to lead prayers and to lead hymns, and it was so peaceful and so beautiful. To me, that is what it means to witness to Jesus, to have faith in God, to demonstrate that faith so others also are drawn to believe in God.

As we celebrate this feast then, I hope that all of us will remember Jesus really now lives with God in glory, but is also here on earth among us, and then we will take seriously the command Jesus gives us to be his witnesses -- witnesses of love, be his witnesses by being believing people, knowing him glorified in heaven, but also living here among us, among our brothers and sisters. As we all give witness to this truth about Jesus and reach out in love to one another, we will begin to make the real keeping of this feast become something authentic in our own lives.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary, Redmond, Mi.]

Source URL (retrieved on *11/29/2015 - 02:00*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/being-believing-people

Links:
[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/051610a.shtml