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## Working to bring 'Reign of God' to Haiti

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the gospel lesson today, we might not at first reflect on how extraordinary this particular event is in the life of Jesus. We've heard this description of this incident many times throughout our lives and so it might seem kind of routine, but in fact, this was a very important turning point in the life of Jesus and of his disciples. We get an indication of this because the first thing Luke tells us is that Jesus had been alone, praying, and undoubtedly he had been praying about what his call was, what his mission was, and how he fit in to human history, who he really is.

It's after that prayer then, that Jesus comes and challenges his disciples with that question: "Who do people say that I am?" He's been traveling around for almost two years now. He's been preaching, he's been healing, he's been dealing with evil spirits. He'd become quite well known, but who do people really think he is? So then the disciples, as we hear, tell him, "Well, some people think you're John the Baptist, some think you're the prophet Elijah, some think you're that great prophet Elijah who was taken off into heaven in the chariot, or maybe one of the other prophets." But then comes a very challenging question: "Okay, who do you say I am?" Peter answers immediately in this text of Luke, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 7, 11

Galatians 2:16, 19-21

In Matthew's gospel, this same event is described, but in Matthew's gospel it becomes more clear how extraordinary was this response of Peter because Matthew describes how Jesus says to him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, because flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but God." Somehow Peter has been given a deeper insight and he recognizes who Jesus really is. That of course will change his whole life as it will for the other disciples also.

But then (and this is what's really important as we listen to this gospel lesson), we have to remember that

this is the living word of God, so that question that Jesus asked of the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus is asking each one of us this morning as we listen. Who do you say Jesus is? Are we ready to say to him, "Yes, we know you are the Christ, the son of the living God?" And if we say that, are we then willing to take up the challenge that Jesus gives to us, "Deny your very self, take up your cross and follow me?"

As we listen to something like this and we hear that question posed to us, we must answer the question within the context of our own lives and what is happening in our world right now? what's happening within our lives and in our world. As you may know, during this past week I was in Haiti again, and I hope I can share with you, and answer that question "Who is Jesus in the midst of what's happening in Haiti, and am I willing to follow him in trying to respond to this terrible situation?"

As I was there this week, it became clear to me that this is an almost unbelievable catastrophe. I've been there before, as you know, but this time it seems even worse than it's been and it's over five months now since that earthquake happened. All kinds of aid have gone down there and lots of people have gone down, but so much is not happening that should be happening. Just the other day on Thursday, the people I was with (there were four or five of us) went to a place we had not been before.

As you probably know, people are living in tents in Port-au-Prince, almost a million of them. This was a small sort of tent community, somewhere between 500 and 1,000 people, and it was right on the edge of the most terrible slum in Port-au-Prince, the part of Port-au-Prince that's called Cite Soleil, city of the sun, but it's an extreme, unbelievable slum area. This small tent village is made up of 500-plus people, all of whom have disabilities. They've been in other places, but they weren't getting what they needed and they, in fact, sometimes were even being shunned so they gathered together and came and established their own small tent village. It wasn't made of tents that you would purchase at a camping store of some sort; these were those tents made with poles and sheets or blankets wrapped around them.

No one had come with food or medicine. They were struggling to get by. No water, of course, and no electricity. In fact, there was a very small pond of water that I asked the young man who serves as our translator and guide, I said, "Where is that water from? Is it part of a stream of some sort?" He said, "No," but this area where they set up these tents had been a sweatshop before, but it had been either destroyed in the earthquake or dismantled and the sweatshop was gone. When it was there, the people owning the sweatshop had dug a well. The pump for the well was gone but the water was still there and the people were there washing their clothes, bathing in that water. I'm sure at times they must drink it. Otherwise they have to walk quite a distance to get water.

There was a little child who followed me when I walked back over to the car. As I opened the car door, he saw on the floor of the car, a container? one of those plastic containers that you might take home food from a restaurant? and he jumped right away and took it, but then when he opened it, it was empty. You could just see the total disappointment. He thought that he was going to get some food; there wasn't any. There was half a bottle of water there and he said, "Water, water," so of course I said, "Yes, take it." So he took it and drank some but then shared it with another little child that was with him, so they had some purified water at least then.

One of the things that really hit me hard was the fact that as I was walking through this village, and then I stepped aside because it was kind of overwhelming. I picked up on my rosary that I had been saying and I happened to be at the third mystery of light -- you know, the new mysteries that John Paul II instituted. That third mystery of light is the public preaching of Jesus where Jesus proclaims the good news, "The reign of God is at hand," and I thought, how can we say that "the reign of God is at hand" when I'm standing here looking at what's going on? The reign of God is when everyone has what you need for a

full human life and these people have nothing. They've been struggling for five months barely to survive.

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So for me, it became very clear that if I'm going to respond to who Jesus really is, and if I'm going to try to follow him, I must deny myself more and share more of what I have with people like this in the world. I also thought how, in light of the first lesson today and that's a passage that we're familiar with because John uses it in his gospel at the crucifixion, "They looked up on the one who was pierced" and I was thinking, here is Jesus being crucified, pierced once more. As I reflect on our second lesson today, it becomes clear, all of us who have been baptized, this is what Paul is saying to the church at Galatia: "If you're baptized, then you are a living Christ, and all of us are the same. There's no Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, slave or free."

We're all the presence of Jesus in our world right now. Jesus lives in us. Jesus is suffering in those people in Haiti. Jesus has called us to follow him, to carry on his work of love and compassion and sharing what we have, so these lessons for me become very real and I hope for you also, and that you will hear that question from Jesus, "Who do you say I am?" and that you will say with faith, "Yes, I know you are the Christ, the son of the living God, and I am willing to be one of your disciples, to follow you, to carry your message of love and compassion," and that the reign of God really is possible if all of us deny ourselves more and follow Jesus.

So I hope that, as you don't read much these days or see much on television about Haiti, you won't forget these people who are still suffering so much, and where there are so many parts of the country but especially within the capital city Port-au-Prince, where the foreign assistance that has been brought down there hasn't reached. In fact, besides thinking of what you might do to give more, perhaps, to help in this situation, Catholic Relief Services is present in Haiti and as you know throughout our country, every parish, shortly after the earthquake, had a special collection for Catholic Relief.

So they have tens of millions of dollars, maybe hundreds of millions that can be used for foreign assistance, and they are. In fact, I know that they have distributed 800,000 meals, which seems like a lot, but when you think about it, there are 700,000 to one million people right there in Port-au-Prince who are living in the streets, their homes just gone. So 800,000 meals means maybe one meal for each person, but it's been five months and there are places where that assistance hasn't come.

Perhaps besides trying to give more, write a letter to Catholic Relief Services and urge them to go out into the slum of Cite Soleil where they haven't been, go to this village where I was the other day, bring the assistance, help to bring clean water and food to these people. The problem is that too much of the aid is concentrated in a few places. It isn't reaching out to all and that's where we need to improve what we're doing through our Catholic Relief Services. Maybe if enough people write to them and urge them, "Go into Cite Soleil, go to these places in the city of Port-au-Prince where no one has been," and it's not hard to find such places, and begin to bring your foreign assistance there because there's still very, very much that has not been distributed."

I hope that as I share my own concern with you and my own reaction to these scriptures of today that you will be with me in hearing what God has spoken in responding to that question of Jesus with faith and also responding to his call, "Follow me," to do his work, help to change this terrible situation in Port-au-Prince so that it begins to look at least a little bit like the reign of God is happening.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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