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Jesus didn't preach just personal salvation

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 26, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

Probably we noticed, as we listened to the gospel, that Jesus really does not answer the person's question, the one who cried out from the crowd, "Will only a few be saved?" Obviously the person asking that question is concerned about personal, individual salvation ? how many are there going to be that will be saved? Jesus doesn't consider that because he didn't come just to preach personal salvation.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 66:18-21
Psalm 117:1, 2
Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13
Luke 13:22-30
Full text of the readings [1]

Remember the very beginning of his public life in Mark's gospel, when Jesus first starts preaching, the first thing he says is, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives." So Jesus is really into proclaiming the reign of God, that time when there will be fullness of life for everyone -- justice, peace, joy -- the reign of God. In the Gospel passage that we hear today, there are a couple of things that are, in a way, kind of hints as to the different approach that Jesus would have this person take if the person weren't thinking just about personal, individual salvation.

First of all, Jesus says, "Enter the narrow gate. Not the wide gate, the narrow gate." In that passage, according to the way Jesus tells it, there will be those who will say, "But we ate with you, we drank with you, you traveled on our streets in our communities," but Jesus will say, "I don't know you." But that narrow gate, instead of being a wide, open gate that would indicate there wasn't much intimacy about it, the narrow gate would be like coming through the back gate, the garden gate, entering into a closer relationship with Jesus as his first disciples did. So that's the first thing if we really are going to hear the message of Jesus and his call to enter into the reign of God which is now at hand. It will be because we begin to listen to him deeply, begin to commune with him in prayer, in communion of mind and spirit and heart.

We will have this personal relationship, and that will be the beginning of our entering into the reign of God.

Also what Jesus does in this passage is, again, indicate not to be concerned about numbers -- many, few, how many are going to saved -- it's what the reign of God is going to be like and how we help to bring about that reign of God. One of the things in the Gospel that Jesus says that becomes quite significant is at the end, when he says that those who were first will be last and the last will be first, and he also indicates that there are going to be people coming from the north, the south, the east, the west, from everywhere. It's the transformation of the whole human family when the reign of God happens. That's reinforced and in fact, where Jesus learned of this, is in what we heard in our first lesson today from the prophet Isaiah. He is proclaiming a message to the exiles. Exiles are people who had been driven away from their homeland, their homes had been destroyed, everything had been destroyed. They were driven into exile and for decades they were in exile. But finally, Isaiah (this is the last chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah) says to the exiles, "Yes, this reign of God will happen. The exiles will return." But look, it isn't just the exiles, the chosen people, "Now I am going to gather the nations of every tongue and they will witness my glory, for I will perform a wonderful thing among them. Then I will send some of their survivors to the nations everywhere," and then Isaiah lists a number of the ancient nations that would have been well known to the people of his time.

He continues, "To the distant islands where no one has ever heard of me or seen my glory," God is going to

send the messengers to them and survivors will come from there, and they will proclaim my glory among the nations. They will bring your brothers and sisters from all the nations, says God." And then, in fact, "I will even choose priests and Levites from them says God. As the new heavens and the new earth that I will make shall endure before me, so will your name and your descendents also endure. From new moon to new moon, from Sabbath to Sabbath, every mortal will come to worship me, says God."

This is a proclamation of universal change. The reign of God is to include the whole human family transformed as living subject to God's will, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Thy kingdom come." That's how it will happen, but it's everyone, not a few, not just my personal salvation; we must be into transforming the world.

In fact, in the prayer of the office for today, it's striking to me that the second reading that is provided for the office that every priest would be saying today, comes from the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council, and hear what the bishops said, talking about the reign of God: "We do not know the time when earth and humanity will reach their completion, nor do we know the way in which the universe will be transformed." But it's going to reach its completion and it will be transformed. This is what they're saying.

"The world as we see it right now, disfigured by sin, is passing away; the reign of God is at hand." That's what Jesus told us, "but we are assured that God is preparing a new dwelling place and a new earth. In this new earth, righteousness," that is, justice, "is to make its home. Happiness, joy, fullness of joy will satisfy and more than satisfy all the yearnings for peace that arise in human hearts.

"On that day when death is conquered, the sons and daughters of God will be raised up in Christ. What was sown as something weak and perishable will be clothed in incorruption. Love and the fruits of love will remain and the whole of creation, made by God for us, will be set free from the frustration that enslaves it."

But then the bishops add, "And yet our hope in a new earth should not weaken, but rather stimulate our concern for developing this earth, for on it there is growing up the body of a new human family, a body even now able to provide some foreshadowing of the fullness of the new age."

They're talking about the reign of God, and how God is bringing this about. Jesus has invited us to be participants in that reign of God, change your eyes, enter into the reign of God, join with Jesus in working to transform our world into the reign of God.

How will that happen? Well, it happened, again, going back to the gospel, when we begin to be truly intimates of Jesus, when we enter that narrow gate. Think of the gate into the private garden, and there we come into deep communion with God and we learn the ways of Jesus, the value system that will make the reign of God happen. And of course, what that is, is the Sermon on the Mount. We need this more than ever, the message that Jesus gives to us where he lays out what it means to live according to the way of God and the reign of God. Chapters five, six and seven in the Gospel of Matthew ? we all have read many parts of that section of the Gospel many times, we know it well, but how important it is for us right now if today, we are going to change our lives deeply and significantly in a way that will be promoting the reign of God, transforming our world.

There's one very specific thing that is happening right now that is so contrary to the reign of God where the prophet Isaiah says, and then Jesus picks up on it, "All people will come. All people will be one in this reign of God, every nation, every person." But we don't have that happening. The situation that I'm speaking about that is so clearly in defiance, almost, of the reign of God, is what is happening in New York City. All of us have heard about this, I'm sure. The anger, hatred even, over the building of a Muslim cultural center, which will include a place of worship. This thing has been planned for over a year, and there was no dispute about it until very recently, and now it's just become a very, very huge issue. The people planning this, the imam, is someone who has spent his life in trying to bring about reconciliation between Muslims and Christians. This is an attempt

to draw us together, to be a bridge between the two.

His name is Feisal Abdul Rauf and he's been preaching a message for 30 years or so, and before him, his father did. They've made extraordinary efforts to bring about harmony and peace, fellowship and common worship and love between Muslims and Christians. This was a further extension of his work, but now it's been attacked and he's been attacked. Yet if we really listen to what Jesus says, what Isaiah says, what the bishops at the Council say, we would understand that this is the kind of thing that should happen. We should be trying to make bridges, bring about reconciliation between Muslims and Christians.

A very significant part of the Sermon on the Mount that shows us the way to enter into the reign of God and to live according to the reign of God, is that part almost at the beginning of the sermon, where Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill.' " Yes, the clear commandment of God, "Thou shalt not kill." Jesus says, "But I say to you, do not even have anger, hatred, vengeance in your heart against a brother or sister." And he makes it so clear that we have to do something to reconcile. He says, "Even if you're going to the altar to offer your gift," you're going to worship God, "and there you remember there's a difference between your brother and sister and you, go first and be reconciled. Then come back and offer your gift."

We cannot let vengeance and hatred go deeply into our hearts and burst forth in the kind of anger and hatred that we've seen. We must go first and be reconciled.

Just in case some are thinking, "Yes, we want to have interaction between Muslims and Christians. Yes, we want that, but it's the place, so close to Ground Zero," but that isn't the truth. This kind of reaction is happening in other places where there are efforts to bring about reconciliation and harmony. In the archdiocese of New York, in fact (not in Manhattan where this cultural center would be built, but on Staten Island a few miles away), a Catholic parish had already agreed to rent its convent to a Muslim group to use it as their mosque, but then people began to speak out saying, "They're terrorists. We can't let them in our neighborhood. We must not have anything to do with them. They can't use the Catholic convent." Hatred.

In fact, in that particular parish, the convent is connected with the school, as you would expect, and there's a board. The Archbishop of New York is on that board, and when the pastor said, "No, we're not going to rent it because so many people objected," he brought it to the board and the board agreed with his decision. Tremendous opportunity to act according to the way of Jesus, to act according to the way of the reign of God, is lost. There are other places in our country -- I've read about a place in Tennessee, I've read about a place in California, and there are many others -- where the same thing is happening. People are developing this spirit of hatred, anger, vengeance. How wrong it is.

If we really listen to what the Word of God tells us today, we will understand that the efforts of Imam Rauf are efforts that we should be very happy about, and we should be quick to try to join with him in this kind of common effort, to make reconciliation happen, to make Christians and Muslims come together in harmony and peace and love. Jesus makes it so clear. We have to take that first step, go first and be reconciled, then come back and offer your gifts.

Of course the implication is that if you are not reconciled, if you have that hatred in your heart, there's no point in coming to worship God. It's a false worship. It's a hypocritical worship if you do it that way, so we really need to listen deeply to God's word today.

We need to remind ourselves that Jesus has called us, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives. Follow me as I lead you along the paths," that will enable our world to be transformed into that reign of God.

We pray today, and we must pray with great fervor, that more and more of us will hear this word and that we will follow it, and the reign of God will break forth even more.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Leo Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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