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Transform the world this Advent, work for justice, peace

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 9, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

When we hear this message today I hope that first of all and most of all we hear the words of John: "The reign of God is at hand."

This is what we will be celebrating when we celebrate the feast of Christmas. We remind ourselves and celebrate that the Son of God has come into human history and, from that point, the reign of God is ready to break forth in its fullness. It's at hand.

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

Romans 15:4-9

Matthew 3:1-12

Full text of the readings [1]

We might wonder, well, what do we mean by that reign of God?
I remind you, first of all, of the first reading from last Sunday -- that was from another part of the book of the prophet Isaiah, the part where the prophet speaks about how in the last days this would be the time when the reign of God would be breaking forth:

> The mountain of God's house shall be set over the highest mountains and shall tower over the hills. All the nations shall stream to it, saying, 'Come, let us go to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may teach us God's ways, and we may follow in God's paths.'

And what will happen as this is the beginning of the reign of God, when all the nations come to learn from God? The reign of God will begin to break forth: "They will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not raise sword against nation. They will train for war no more."

See the reign of God is a time when the fullness of peace would come into our world. Nations will not train for war. We will not have money spent in the billions and hundreds of billions of dollars for weapons because we will have peace.

In today's passage from Isaiah, in a very poetic way the prophet spells out again what peace will be like, because as he says: "From a stump of Jesse, a shoot will come forth,"

Jesse, the father of David. That kingdom seemed to have been ended, but now a shoot will break forth -- a descendent of David -- and on that descendent the spirit of God will rest. And as a result, because this descendent is proclaiming God's words and God's ways:

> the wolf will dwell with the lamb. The leopard will rest beside the kid. The calf and the lion cub will feed together and a little child will lead them. Befriending each other, the cow and the bear will see their young ones lie down together. By the cobra's den, the infant will play. The child will put his hand into the viper's lair, but no one will harm or destroy over my holy mountain, for as water fills the sea, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God.

So the reign of God is a time when all of creation is brought together in harmony and peace, everything fitting together in a beautiful, glorious way -- the reign of God.

Now I think it might be the tendency for all of us to say, "Yes, that's very poetic, very beautiful, but Isaiah probably didn't live at a time like ours, where there is so much violence, where there are wars, where there are acts of terrorism."

If he knew what it was like in our time, he would not speak in that fashion, it seems. He would not dare to say that all weapons would be taken away or peace will break forth.

Yet, if you look at the passage just before today's passage, Isaiah is actually living in a time of terror. The Assyrians, who have threatened the chosen people many times, are invading -- coming forth with huge armies to enter into the Promised Land and destroy the people.

Isaiah describes it this way:

> They have gone up from Rimmon and have come to Aiath. They have passed through Migron, stored supplies at Michmash. They have crossed over the pass and now camp at Geba for the night. Ramah is in terror, Gibeah of Saul has fled. Lift up your voice, O daughter of Gallim! Let it be heard! Madmenah is in flight, the people of Gebim flee for their lives.

So Isaiah was living in a time when there was violence and war -- just like our time. But he's looking forward to the coming of the one who will change all of that, who will proclaim: "The reign of God is at hand," and who will begin to make that reign of God happen.

But -- of course -- it doesn't just happen. There is also what John the Baptist said in our Gospel lesson today when he proclaimed this good news that the reign of God is now at hand. He also said, "Change your lives." This is how the reign of God will break forth, when enough of us begin to listen to the message of Jesus and we change our lives, we live according to his way.

His way is described, again, in that passage from Isaiah that we listened to today, where he tells us: "With justice this descendent of David, the one we call the Christ, Jesus, with justice he will judge the poor, with righteousness decide for the meek, the gentle. Like a rod, his word will strike the oppressor and justice will be the girdle of his waist, truth the girdle of his loins."

So because justice begins to happen, the reign of God can break forth.

If we are to truly heed the message of today, that the reign of God is at hand, we must make the choice to follow Jesus. Jesus is the one who has justice as the girdle around his waist, who is looking out for the poor, the oppressed.

So as we try to change our lives, perhaps the first thing we must do is what Matthew says John spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Let it be seen that you are serious in your conversion." John saw them as being hypocrites.

It reminds me of the Gospel from earlier this past week, one of the weekday gospels, with Jesus telling the people: "Not everyone who says to me, ?Lord, lord,? will enter the reign of God, but those who do the will of God" and act on the word of Jesus. That's how we enter into the reign of God.

There are so many ways in which, in our time right now, we must work for justice, work to turn our swords into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks.

We have before us in our Congress a treaty that has been signed by our President and the President of Russia to reduce nuclear weapons that could wipe out our planet, but it's being held up in our senate -- not being ratified.

If we would cut back our arsenals as called for in this treaty, we would begin to have the resources to provide for the poor of our own nation, to provide for the poor of the world.

A long time ago, Pope Paul VI said that the arms race in itself is an act of aggression against the poor and must be condemned. We haven't heeded "Not everybody who says to me, 'Lord, lord,' but those who do the will of God." We do not want to be like those Sadducees and those Pharisees who were not serious about their conversion. We must demand that that treaty be ratified. Then we will be following the way of Jesus in justice.

The discrepancy between the poor and the rich in our own country is becoming ever greater and again we have some legislation in the Congress that could help to bring about a change so that the rich would not be getting richer and the poor poorer.

In the tax bill that is being debated, President Obama wants to retain the part of that bill that gave tax relief for the lower middle class and the poor. And he wants to continue to tax the rich, not remove that part of the bill, and allow that part of the tax to go on. That plan would save, in ten years, $700 billion.

Do that top percent of our people -- the richest, super rich -- do they need this tax cut? Would it not be the right thing to try to share the resources, the goods of our planet and our world, of our country?

Surely Jesus, who always chose to be with the poor and act for the poor, would want us to be on the side of not imposing any further taxes on the middle class. Put that money into our economy, help to build it up. And by taxing the super rich we would be saving those hundreds of billions of dollars.

There are so many ways in which -- if we listen to the words of Jesus, if we follow his example and really care about the poor (God hears the cry of the poor, surely Jesus heard the cry of the poor), if we're going to follow him and change our lives -- the reign of God will begin to break forth.

The promise that Isaiah gives us, the promise that Jesus himself gives us as he began his public life -- he too, like John, proclaimed: "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives."

Surely if we follow the way of Jesus we must begin to change our lives and really work for peace, the end of armaments, the end of war -- work for that, try to make it happen, really work for justice, try to share the wealth within our nation and among the nations, so that everyone on this planet has an opportunity for a full human life.

It will require changing our lives, but can't we listen to Jesus -- his pleading for the poor, his concern for justice -- and follow him?

Perhaps as we reflect on this we can try to determine how, in my life, I can be more faithful in following Jesus, enter into this reign of God which is at hand, and -- together with Jesus -- make that reign of God begin to become something that changes all of our earth, all of creation.

As we try to do this, perhaps we can turn to the prayer that St. Paul has in our second lesson today: "May God, the source of all perseverance and comfort, give to all of you to live in peace in Jesus Christ, that you may be able to praise in one voice God, the Father of Christ Jesus our Lord. Look! Christ put himself at the service of the world to fulfill the promises made by God."

Here you see God's faithfulness and Paul is praying that that faithfulness of God will be poured forth upon us.

We can change our lives, we can follow Jesus. And then this reign of God which is breaking forth will more and more transform our world until it becomes the image of God's reign in its fullness.

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

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