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It's up to us to fulfill Jesus' vision of peace

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 16, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

When I began to reflect on this Gospel lesson that we hear today, I immediately began to think of the first lesson in relationship to it. You can tell they?re very closely related.

The first lesson especially reminded me of something I?ve shared before and that is about the visit of Pope John Paul II to Spain during that last year of his life, when he was still struggling to give leadership to the church even though his health was obviously becoming worse and worse.

He appeared in Spain. The first night he was there, the report describes him as being almost overwhelmed with what the reporter called ?a palpable sadness over the war in Iraq? -- the war that, at that point in his papacy, John Paul had tried so hard to prevent and which went ahead anyway and is still going on. It?s been a tremendous cross for the people of Iraq and the people of the world, in fact.
But that night, John Paul, filled with sadness, began to cry out to the people: ?Peace, peace -- what the world needs is peace!?

Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11
Full text of the readings
[1]

It was like a mantra; he kept repeating, coming back to it: ?The world needs peace. We must have peace.? He was just filled with this awareness of how wrong the violence and the war really is.

But the next day when he was speaking to a crowd of perhaps a half million -- mostly young people -- and he became energized by their response to him, that?s when he spoke some words that to me, are very clearly related to our Gospel today and to the lesson from Isaiah:

?Beloved young people, you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world,? -- and then he condemned what he called a ?spiral of violence, terrorism, war? and he begged them: ?Be artisans of peace. Respond to blind violence and human hatred with the fascinating power of love.?

Isn?t that what we hear in our lesson today from Isaiah, from Jesus?

Isaiah is what John Paul is urging the young people to be -- an artisan of peace, one who has a vision, a dream of what can happen. Isaiah is confronted with the situation where the chosen people are being threatened by an invasion that?s going to bring war and violence and hatred into their midst and many of them are afraid.

Isaiah says: ?Give vigor to weary hands and strength to enfeebled knees. Say to those who are afraid, ?Have courage, do not fear.??

Then he presents the vision of what?s going to happen:

> See, your God comes and God is the God who brings life, comes to bring God?s saving love. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed. Then will the lame leap as a hart and the tongue of the mute sing and shout, for the ransomed of Yahweh will return with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will come to Zion singing, gladness and joy marching with them while sorrow and sighing

flee away.

Truly a dream, a vision, and that?s what we hear in the Gospel lesson in a little bit of a different way. Here is John the Baptist, that great prophet that we heard about the last couple of Sundays. John the Baptist is now in prison.

You may remember. He had boldly and openly condemned the life of Herod and his queen, who was not really his wife; they were living in adultery and John had denounced them.

Now he is in prison, waiting to be put to death. It seems really almost unbelievable, but John is suddenly afraid. The one who had proclaimed: ?This is the lamb of God,? about Jesus, now he sends his disciples to Jesus: ?Are you the one who is to come, or do we wait for another??

John was beginning to doubt, and it?s understandable. Here he is in this prison, isolated in what would have been a prison of just terrible surroundings and circumstances of darkness, foul smells -- just dank and dirty and abandoned, alone, and begins to doubt.

So he sends his disciples: ?Are you the one who is to come,? and Jesus responds, not directly, but he says: ?Go and tell John what you see and hear,? and what it is, of course, is the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah.

That vision, that dream, has now happened. Jesus, the son of God, is present in our world -- so now, tell John that the blind see, the deaf begin to hear, the lame begin to walk, and the good news (and this is especially marvelous) is reaching the poor. So everyone is blessed who begins to hear the message of Jesus, does not take offense at Jesus.

So we are being reminded today as we reflect on these lessons that yes, Jesus has come, that vision that Isaiah had is being fulfilled.

The dream, the vision, that John Paul pleads with these young people to have -- the vision that swords will be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and the nations will study war no more, the time of peace -- this is the vision.

It?s going to come about by following the way of Jesus, the way of bringing healing and good news to the poor especially -- to those suffering. This is beginning to happen and it?s the fulfillment of the vision. John Paul uses it to urge the young people: ?Be artisans of peace. You have the dream now. Begin to live it, to fulfill it, to carry it out.?

That?s what?s being said to us today through these lessons -- that we first of all rejoice because Jesus has come and we?re going to celebrate in two weeks that moment when Jesus entered into human history, the son of God became one of us.

And we?re going to celebrate that once more and remind ourselves that Jesus came to bring us this vision, to ask us to follow him, to help to make that vision realized. And of course, it?s very slow in coming and that?s why the words of James this morning are so important:

?Beloved, see the judge is already at the door. Jesus is here? -- that?s what James is saying -- ?so take for yourselves as an example of patience, the suffering of the prophets who spoke in God?s name. See how those who are patient are called blessed.?

We want it all to happen immediately. James says, yes, that vision has been proclaimed. The vision has been fulfilled in Jesus -- the dream has begun -- but it hasn?t reached its fullness.

That?s why also during this season of Advent -- as we look forward once more to celebrate the coming of the son of God into human history, and we look forward to the vision that Jesus proclaims and makes happen as we look back and see how it has been happening -- we know that it still must come to its fullness.

And we are now the ones -- the disciples -- who are not to lose faith in Jesus, who must take up that message, that vision, that dream. And with Jesus entering into our world, into our hearts, into our very lives, we carry on his work and we are patient in the midst of lots of suffering and wars all around us, the poor being deprived.

But we know this is all going to change with our entering into the way of Jesus more fully.

This morning then -- as we reflect on these scripture lessons that are so powerful -- we pray that during these last two weeks of Advent we will prepare ourselves even more.

So that, as we celebrate that moment when Jesus entered into human history, we invite him into our lives in a very new and powerful way -- that we catch his vision, his dream, and with Jesus we begin to transform our world into the reign of God, when the vision will be fully realized and God?s love will transform all of us, all of our world, and the reign of God will be present in its fullness.

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

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