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Being the light of the world and the salt of the earth

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 10, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

The following homily was given by Bishop Gumbleton Feb.6. Because of the snow storms in the Midwest we are posting two of the bishop's homilies this week.

Again, to remind us of how today's Gospel lesson fits in with what has been happening in the Gospels we've been hearing the preceding Sundays, I remind you that Jesus has just called his first disciples, and he has told them that they were to be the ones that were to go out and spread the Good News everywhere.
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Then after he called them, he reminded them that the reign of God is at hand. You must change your lives.

Then he began to teach them as I indicated before.He began that beautiful, long Sermon on the Mount, beginning with those Beatitudes that we know so well.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 58:7-10
Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Matt. 5:13-16
Full text of the readings [1]

Then Jesus says something that is for every one of us.

"As you follow My way, you are the light of the world." You become salt of the earth, the light that enlightens everything, that takes away darkness and gloom and brings brightness, and with it, joy and life. The salt gives flavor and preserves goodness.

That is for those who heed the Word of God, who listen to this extraordinary sermon that Jesus preaches. This began last Sunday and goes on for many verses in Matthew's Gospel, and it's a very difficult way that Jesus shows us, but if we live it, we will become salt of the earth and light for the world.

The other lessons today show us, I think, two specific ways, drawing from the Beatitudes, on how we become salt for the world and light for the earth.

First of all, from our first lesson today, this is something that was proclaimed 500 years before Jesus. The Prophet Isaiah is reminding the chosen people of how they, at that time, become a light for their world.

Fast by sharing your food with the hungry. Bring to your house the homeless. Clothe the one you see naked. Do not turn away from your own kin. In those Beatitudes, Jesus said, "Blest are those who hunger and thirst for justice," and here is Isaiah saying the same thing.

We hunger and thirst so that everyone on this planet could have an opportunity for a full human life. God has given enough resources for all and Isaiah had proclaimed to the chosen people long ago that the way to make that happen is to share your bread with the hungry. Bring to your house the homeless. Clothe the one you see naked. Make justice happen. Share the goods of the earth.

We live in this society where this isn't happening.

We have a huge number of poor people within our own midst here in the richest country in the whole world, and throughout the world there are a majority of people who do not share in what God has given for all.

Each of us has to begin to think about how I can share my bread with the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, welcome the stranger, the immigrant. This requires not only reaching out and sharing in a very active way; it requires a change in our attitude, that we really understand that God loves the poor and hears the cry of the poor.

If we are to be the disciples of Jesus, we must do the same. Then we begin to be a light for the world and the salt of the earth.

Then in our second lesson today, St. Paul reminds us of what is maybe the most difficult of all the teachings of Jesus. In the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaimed, "Blest are the peacemakers, those who overcome violence and hatred that leads to fighting, war, destruction and death. Blest are the peacemakers."

For Jesus, making peace was something that had to be done in a very special way. St. Paul says it, "I came to proclaim the Good News, but not in terms of human wisdom and power. I came only to preach Christ crucified." Jesus the Christ gives up power and might, and reaches out in forgiveness and reconciliation and love.

Even as he's being executed and tortured, he prays, "Forgive them." He reaches out in love, and that is how peace is made.

Blest are the peacemakers. Sometimes we do have the blessing of extraordinary examples that maybe will encourage and inspire us to really change our way of thinking. Again, it's something very deep.

You don't change your actions until you change your heart. So we really have to have a sensitive, loving heart, rejecting violence.

This past week we've all been aware, I'm sure, of what's been going on in Cairo, in Tahrir Square.

The other day, in the newspaper, Nicholas Kristof wrote a column, in which he described something that really is an inspiration for all of us.

This was a day when, as he said,

> "Pro-government thugs use clubs, machetes, swords and straight razors to try to crush Egypt's democracy movement, but for me, the most memorable moment of a sickening day was a moment of inspiration, watching two women stand up to the mob.
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> "I was on Tahrir Square, watching armed young men pour in to scream in support of President Mubarak, and to battle the pro-democracy protestors. Everybody, me included, tried to give them a wide berth, and the bodies of the injured being carried away added to the tension. Then along came two middle aged sisters, Amal and Minna, walking toward the square to join the pro-democracy movement.

> "They had their heads covered in the conservative Muslim style, and they looked timid and frail, as thugs surrounded them, jostled them, shouted at them, yet side-by-side with the ugliest of humanity, you find the best. The two sisters stood their ground. They explained calmly to the mob why they favored democratic reform and they listened patiently to the screams of the pro-Mubarak mob.
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> "Finally when the women refused to be cowed, the men lost interest and began to move on, and the two women continued to walk peacefully to the center of the square."

That is a dramatic example of people refusing to respond to violence with violence. That's what will bring the peace finally, if it comes to Egypt. It will be because of the people in that square refusing to respond to violence with violence.

We have other examples of this. Again, there is something very recent. We're all aware of what happened with that terrible shooting in Tucson but I wonder if we're aware of how, or are really inspired by the parents of Christina Green, that beautiful 11-year-old child who seemed to have such a promising future.

Already in the fourth grade, she was the president of their class council. She was a definite leader, a gifted child, shot to death, but her parents never once reacted with hatred or violence towards the killer or towards his parents.

In fact, Mr. Green spoke out and said, "I have compassion for his parents. I feel their hurt." Even in his own, terrible grief, he was reaching out in love.

That's what Jesus tells us we must do if we're going to follow him. Blest are the peacemakers, and we make peace by responding to hatred and violence only with love. You are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and that will be true if we share our bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless poor, clothe the naked, and if we return love for violence, love for hatred, and become peacemakers.

That's how you and I will be a light to the world and the salt of the earth.

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

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/020611.shtml