

Live out the transforming love of Jesus

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 24, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

Today's Gospel comes immediately after a very important event in the life of Jesus, where Peter had just proclaimed that he and the disciples recognized Jesus as the Son of the Living God.

Then Jesus said to Peter, "Blessed are you, Peter," and urged Peter to follow Him as He went on to Jerusalem to His suffering and death. Then Peter rejected that demand of Jesus and said, "No, it doesn't have to be that way."

Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan." Now we pick up today's Gospel in Matthew.

As we listened to our Scripture lessons today, I hope that most of all we will carry home with us in our hearts -- and echo in our minds -- listen to Jesus.

If we do that, we will be able to carry out what Paul urges us in his letter to Timothy: "Do your share in laboring for the Gospel, with the strength of God. Do your share in making the message of Jesus proclaimed and heard, and brought to fulfillment in our world. Listen to Jesus."

We can do this, I think, very well and probably only if we listen deeply to all the lessons of today.

Our first lesson from the Book of Genesis is the beginning of a whole new section in that book. The first 11 chapters are what we would call pre-history. They're stories, myths, a writing down of what people had tried to discern about those questions that troubled all of us. Who are we? Where did we come from? Who is God? How does God act in our lives?

The story of creation, the beginnings of everything is recorded there and as we hear people experience this, "God saw all that God had made and it is good," everything is blessing. Then, something obviously had gone wrong and sin, evil had come into the world.

We hear those passages, the accounts in this pre-history, of Adam and Eve, and their rebellion against God. Cain and Abel showed violence coming into human history. Then the arrogance of people brought on the flood that, in the story, destroys the whole earth. Noah and his son Ham's disrespect of him broke up the bright relationships within the human family.

Finally, there was the building of the Tower of Babel, where humankind tried to show its domination over all the earth. Now that is all pre-history.

With Abraham we start what we would call recorded history, the events of which there are records or recollections that deal with real people, real times, and real incidents. At the beginning of it all is the call of Abraham. This is what we hear in our first lesson today.

Yahweh said to Abraham: "Leave your country, your family and your father's house for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing to

bring the blessing of God back into the world.?

So then the rest of the Bible really is how God devises a strategy to reverse those things that had disrupted the beauty and goodness of all creation. The story of Abraham, in fact, almost seems to consciously reverse the elements of that last episode of pre-history, the Tower of Babel.

The ambitious people who were going to build their city and tower say, ?Let us make a great name for ourselves,? but Abraham is told by God, ?I, God, will make your name great.?

The second goal of the builders of that Tower of Babel was to prevent their being scattered all over the earth.

Abraham is told, ?Abandon your security, whatever you have where you are living. Take the risk of going to a land,? God says, ?That I will show you.?

So Abraham is urged to leave everything behind, all that he knows, all that is safe. He and Sarah are invited to go, to be the beginning of the reversal of what has happened during that period that we call pre-history, where creation was corrupted and evil became part of what God had seen was good.

Then, we have the great Sinai covenant recorded, where God proclaims to Moses, ?I will be your God. You will be My people,? and the Ten Commandments and the rules that begin to shape the chosen people. Down through the history of the Bible, we see God interacting through the law, through the prophets, through the various incidents in the history of the chosen people.

Now we come to today?s Gospel.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John, and goes up the mountain, kind of recalling the whole scene of Moses going up the mountain to encounter God. Before their very eyes, they see Jesus transformed, made very different.

His clothes shown like light. His whole demeanor was totally changed, and they saw Him carrying on a conversation with Moses and Elijah, the two people to represent the law and the prophets more completely than any others would.

Jesus is carrying on a conversation with them and is obviously an equal with them, but then, as Peter proclaims in joy, ?Lord, it?s good for us to be here. Let?s stay. I will build three tents.?

Then the cloud comes over and the disciples fall to the ground in fear and that?s when God proclaims, ?This is My Son, My Beloved. Listen to Him.? There can be no better way for God to reveal how Jesus fulfills everything that has been happening up to this time.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and now it is important for us to listen to Him. The first disciples came down that mountainside and continued on their journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, and we hope, listened much more carefully than ever before.

That?s the call given to us: listen now to Jesus. Jesus is the one who culminates all the strategy that God had been carrying out through the history of the chosen people. Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that has gone before. We must listen to him.

One of the reasons why I made the comment before I read today?s Gospel of how this was just six days after that very important event had happened, where Jesus had asked the disciples, ?Who do people say that I am??

They say, ?Some say Moses. Some say Elijah or one of the prophets.?

?Who do you say that I am??

Peter says, ?You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.?

And Jesus says, ?Blessed are you, Simon, son of John because no human has revealed this to you, but God.?

Peter had recognized who Jesus is, but then he had failed because as Jesus went on to say, ?Now, follow me. Take up your cross and follow Me,? -- because as Jesus said, ?I must go to Jerusalem. There I will suffer many things through the authorities, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and will be killed but raised on the third day? -- Peter said, ?No, you don?t have to do this.?

Peter began to reproach him, ?No, never, Lord. No, this must never happen to You.? That?s how Matthew records it.

Jesus says, ?Get behind Me, Satan.?

Peter is rejecting the way of Jesus. He is not listening to Jesus. There is a danger that we, too, can be caught up in the vision of Jesus as the Light, enveloped in this fullness of light, everything changed and the joy and peace, the exhilaration that brings, but without listening, ?I must take up my cross. I must go to Jerusalem and there suffer many things, take up my cross, be executed, be tortured, be put to death, and through suffering, accepting suffering, responding to hatred, by love.?

The supreme message of Jesus transformed the evil of this world, the hatred, the sin, transformed it through the overpowering transforming power of love.

We?ve had some extraordinary experiences very recently of how this can be done, how violence can be overturned by people responding to violence with non-violence: Egypt and Tunisia, where people had prepared and planned over a period of two years to carry out a non-violent revolution, and it was achieved in those two countries.

The transforming power of love can change situations of hatred and violence. The message of Jesus -- people were doing it and we see these examples even out of the wisdom of people who understand that violence only begets violence, hatred begets hatred.

We have to change. That?s the supreme message of Jesus. Two days ago in the paper, it was reported how President Aristide returned to Haiti. Now you know, Haiti is a country that is very close to my heart. I?ve been there so many times, I?ve known President Aristide for over 20 years, and what he stands for, what he?s committed his life to.

Yet, in the report that I read in the paper, he?s described as polarizing, but closely followed figure, beloved by the poor, but reviled by others as corrupt and autocratic, encouraging violence. I don?t know where they get that.

You could say the same thing about Jesus. He was polarizing, closely followed and beloved by the poor, hated by others who eventually put him to death. Aristide seems to me to be following in the way of Jesus, and yet, there are always these remarks about him, that he will turn to violence, which isn?t true.

He is a man committed to non-violence, to transforming the world through non-violence. He?s a man committed to the Gospel of Jesus. So, there?s hope now for Haiti because we have someone who has come back, not to engage in the political life of the country any longer, but to be an educator, to be an inspirer of the people, a man who does, from my experience and I say this with confidence, listen to Jesus.

We can and must pray that the message of Jesus will be heard in Haiti, and that that country can be transformed now out of the bitter suffering that they've been experiencing since the earthquake, the hurricane and the epidemic of cholera.

I have hope that, with the return of Aristide that that can happen, but these are only a couple of examples of what must go on in our world.

Again, this can inspire us, what happened in Egypt, where just yesterday they voted for a new constitution and what happened in Tunisia, and what can now happen in Haiti, with this leadership coming in.

It is inspired leadership of one who is beloved by the poor, but it's also what must happen in your life and my life. Again, as God says in the Gospel, "This is My Son, My Beloved. Listen to Him."

You and I must listen to Jesus and then, as Paul urges us, do our share in laboring for this Gospel of love.

We must do our share in every way we can to proclaim the Good News of God's love for us and for all of creation, manifested so clearly by God sending Jesus into the world to show us the way to transform our world in the way of love. Listen to Jesus.

Do our share in laboring for the Gospel, by living out the way of love that Jesus shows us.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Leo Church in Detroit, Mich.]

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