

Be people of hope

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 6, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

Remember last weekend when there was great concern among many people -- in fact, throughout our country -- because there were those who were saying that last Saturday was to be Judgment Day, the day when the beginning of the end of the world would happen.

I'm sure most of us quite easily dismissed that because we can remember how Jesus said, when the disciples asked Him when His return would be, He told them, "That is not for me even as Son of God but as man now to know." So it's something that Jesus said was not to be revealed.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Yet, I wonder, ^{Acts 8:5-8, 14-17} how many of us might have had some concern at least because we are still remembering God as a harsh God, a God who might condemn us to hell forever?

^{Psalm 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20}

If we listen to today's Gospel, we discover that God's commandments are not rules that we must follow, and if we don't follow them we're going to be condemned by God. It's not that way at all. God is a God of love, total love. God loved us into being and God sustains in being in every moment of our existence. God is love and that's what Jesus makes so clear in today's Gospel lesson. When we're asked by Jesus to follow His commandments and His way of life, it's an invitation in order to draw us more deeply into the life of God. It's not something that is like the ^{John 14:15-21} that held over us, "If you don't do it, you're condemned."

It isn't that at all. Jesus shows us a God who is totally a God of love. He promises us, "If you follow My way, I will ask God and God will give you another paraclete." Remember, He's talking to the disciples at the Last Supper, and they're really sad and discouraged because He's going to be gone, but He says, "You need not worry. I will ask God and God will give you another paraclete." It's a word that means helper. This paraclete is one that will be at your side. This paraclete is the very spirit of God, the spirit of Jesus, to be with us. "On that day, you'll know that I am in God and you are in Me, and I am in you."

Jesus promises, "Follow My way and you will experience a deep communion with God, God living within your very spirit, you living within the spirit of God." It's a promise that if we follow His way -- and that's an invitation, "Follow Me. Follow My commandments," -- this is what will happen. Jesus puts it in a very beautiful way when He tells us, "I will not leave you orphans."

How is Jesus picturing Himself and picturing God? As a parent, and so, Jesus is the embodiment of what clearly is the motherly love of God. Going back to the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, where that prophet speaking for God proclaims, "Sing, O heavens. Rejoice, O earth. Break forth into song, O mountains, for God has comforted God's people."

Zion, God's people said, "God has forsaken us. God has forgotten us." Then the prophet, speaking for God, says, "Can a woman forget the baby at her breast? Could a mother's love ever be broken or ended?" Of course not; we know that. It's so deep within the nature of a mother to always love her child and Jesus is saying, "I am a parent

and like a mother, I will never forget you." That's how deep the love of God is for us.

It is also that love of God that is like a fatherly love, too, where we find in one of the Psalms, in Psalm 69, "God is the father of orphans, the protector of widows. Such is our God in God's holy dwelling. God gives shelter to the homeless, sets prisoners free." Jesus is this embodiment of a God who is total love, motherly love, fatherly love, love that cannot be broken, love without condition. "Follow My way," is what Jesus is telling us, "And you will experience deep within yourself."

In the first lesson today, we're reminded how that happened, right at the beginning. The disciples, or in this case, Philip, had gone outside of Jerusalem where the Christian community was gathered together and had been persecuted, so they were scattering. He was preaching in a new place, in Samaria, but then to show how God follows through on the promises Jesus made to us at the Last Supper, Peter and John come and bestow the Holy Spirit, that paraclete, that helper who is the embodiment of the motherly and fatherly love of God.

Then there is one more thing we're asked to do by St. Peter, in speaking to us today: Be people of hope. Begin to experience this and nothing will destroy your deep sense of confidence and hope when you experience all that Jesus promises, but then, be ready to give the reason for your hope.

I think what Peter means by that is not so much that we speak words and try to convince people by our words that God is a paraclete, a helper, a spirit who lives within us and who we share a deep communion with, but to speak that hope by the way we live.

Once more, this past week, I had the opportunity to be in the country of Haiti, and I can share with you how for me, at first, it's so dispiriting. It just makes you want to weep, be discouraged and give up because here it is, almost 18 months after that terrible earthquake happened where 200,000 people were killed, that the people of Haiti, almost every one of them experienced some loss in their close family.

The city is still filled with rubble. You look anywhere and you can see garbage and trash strewn along the streets. There are almost a million people who are still having to survive in tents or now some temporary wood housing that is very small, without plumbing, without electricity, and without running water. A whole family -- even more than one family sometimes -- is crowded into a space no bigger than a garage.

When I see all of that, I feel dispirited and discouraged, and yet, when I spend a few days there and begin to really exchange with the people of Haiti, my hopefulness rises.

It's not because I suddenly see it's going to be better overnight. No, that's not it. It's because I begin to experience what the people of Haiti profess, not because they preach at me, but simply because of the way they live. They live with a kind of hopefulness, knowing that somehow, out of all this suffering, God will bring goodness.

These are really people of faith. I had special experiences being able to visit with President Aristide and his wife. Their family has now returned to Haiti.

Now here is a person who, under the dictator Duvalier, was almost murdered more than once and lived under constant threat to his life. Then, as he became president, he was forced out in a coup, forced into exile. He came back five years later and was re-elected, but again was forced out in a coup and has to live in exile, this time for seven years. It was a very difficult exile. It was almost as though he and his family were under house arrest. I remember when I visited with him in South Africa, and he told me how hard it was for his children.

Imagine this. These are kids. When they left the country, the younger one was five and the older one was seven. For seven years, they are taken to school early in the morning and brought home right afterwards. They can't

have any contact with other children, and they kept asking, "Why can't we go home?" They weren't able to for seven years, but now they're back.

In spite of all that, President Aristide is a person who is filled with hope. You sense it as soon as you meet with him and talk with him. He's developing plans about how he's going to work for better education in his country, and he's a marvelous scholar, a brilliant man.

He's going to re-establish a medical school that he had started when he was president and had been damaged in the earthquake. That's why he's committed to this, with hope.

You can't spend more than a few minutes with him and his wife and family without realizing they are teaching me, and would teach all of us, a lesson.

We live in God's spirit. God's spirit lives within us. God has not left us orphans. The motherly and fatherly love of God is always present to us, and will bring us through every difficulty, every struggle, every kind of suffering, even bring us through death to new life. That is the type of hope that the people of Haiti profess by the way they live. That's the kind of hope that every one of us should profess by our lives.

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

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