

Look for Jesus in the 99 percent

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 23, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

Some years ago, a Dominican priest named Albert Nolan wrote and published a book that was entitled *Jesus before Christianity*. That might seem like a puzzling title to you because we would say that Jesus and Christianity are the same, but what Fr. Nolan was writing about very convincingly was that Jesus, when He lived among His disciples here on earth and then when He first began to live within the community disciples, proclaimed a very radical, even revolutionary message, a message that is very hard to hear and to really take in and understand, and then to follow.

So what began to happen was that those communities of disciples of Jesus that had sprung up in many different places began to become institutionalized and "organized." They lost some of the authenticity of the message of Jesus. ~~Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King~~ Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 do this even now, we tend to take the really hard Gospel message that Jesus teaches and we try to gloss it over, make it more acceptable, make it easier to live. "Woe to the rich." Who wants to hear that, especially in a culture where riches are so important? "Blest are the poor." Do you want to hear that? Psalms 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6 No, we don't want to be poor and destitute. Of course not. But we don't even want to settle for what's enough. We always want more and more. In last Sunday's Gospel, when Jesus was teaching us about how to live in the in-between times, "Beware of greed in every form," He warned us. 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 The authentic message of Jesus we have made more acceptable.

Matthew 25:31-46 Probably one of the most difficult teachings of Jesus that we've seen in this feast that we now celebrate called Christ the King, we take part of the message of Jesus and totally distort it. They didn't celebrate Jesus as King in the early centuries, Full text of the readings [1] in the early communities. In fact, this never became a feast until the 20th century. What Jesus did in His life was He rejected the idea of being a king, someone with power, wealth and might, that could command peoples and lead armies.

You may remember at one point after that incident where he fed 5,000-plus people in the desert. They wanted to make Him king. They thought, "Now we'll have everything." Jesus wanted to hide. He escaped them. Maybe the most dramatic way in which Jesus showed us that He did not want to be king with power, with might, with armies and wealth was at that last Sabbath day of His life when He was coming into Jerusalem, which we celebrate as Palm Sunday. The people were crying out, "Hosanna, hosanna to the King of David."

Again, they were trying to make Him a king. So what does He do? He finds a very dramatic way to reject the whole idea of being king. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and St. Matthew, when he records this, cites the Prophet Zachariah. Listen to what this says, this is what Jesus is proclaiming to the people who wanted to make Him a king: "Rejoice greatly," Zachariah says. "Shout for joy, for your king is coming, just, humble and riding on a donkey," not a war horse but the animal that would be used by a peasant or a slave.

"No more chariots in Befram. No more horses in Jerusalem, for He will do away with them. The warriors bow shall be broken when He dictates peace to the nations, and that way He will reign from sea to sea." He's not a king in the way we think of a king. Jesus rejected power, violence and war. He rejected all of that. Even when He was to defend Himself personally in the garden, just before he was executed, Peter tries to defend Him with

a sword and Jesus says, "Put away the sword. Anyone who lives by the sword will die by the sword."

He rejected violence. He rejected war. He rejected those things that kings historically tended to do. He did not want to be a king. I think we devised this kind of a feast because we want to think of Jesus as someone powerful, as a ruler who has might and power, but the only way Jesus will bring people together to follow Him is not through coercion or force. It's when He's totally helpless, on a cross, pouring forth His love for everyone. "I, when I'm lifted up, will draw all people to Myself," by the fascinating power of love.

That's the only power that Jesus wants to exercise and wants us to exercise. That is a challenge, and if we understand this feast of Christ the King as Jesus would understand His (in some fashion) being a king, it's everything that contradicts what we think of as a ruler, a king, a powerful person, a powerful nation. In fact, Jesus gives us the way He would serve us, not as a king. Remember Jesus, in John's Gospel especially, is described as the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep, and His sheep know Him personally, every one of them.

Jesus enters into a loving relationship. Jesus drew that from our first lesson today, when the people were struggling when their leaders were people, were being unfaithful, their civil leaders and religious leaders. Zachariah or Ezekiel says, "God says this, I, myself, will care for my sheep, watch over them. As a shepherd looks after his flock when he finds them scattered, so will I watch over my sheep and gather them from all the places where they were scattered. I, myself, will tend my sheep. I will search for the lost, lead back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak."

That's how Jesus lives among us. He showed us that when he was living here on earth. Jesus, who lives in our midst even now, is the Jesus who reaches out to us in love, caring for us, nurturing us, not a Jesus who would ever use force or violence. So the image of Jesus that we must carry away is that image. The image of Jesus that we must try to follow is that image. Our Gospel lesson reinforces this very much today, because if you want to find Jesus in this world now, did you hear what the Gospel said?

You're going to find Jesus not in the 1 percent that people are talking about in these occupations. Jesus will be in the 99 percent, and especially in the poorest and the weakest of the 99 percent, those who are in desperate need, those who are homeless, those who are hungry, those who do not have clean water, those who are fleeing their own land because they're starving, and who are coming into our country as immigrants, the poor. That's where Jesus is now. He identifies himself with the poorest of the poor.

If we wish to honor Jesus, to really accept Him into our lives, to follow Him, then we have to be the ones who reach out to the poor, who welcome the stranger, the immigrant. Recently there has been some emphasis by some leaders in the Church, and I've read about different Bishops in various dioceses promoting what we call sacramental adoration, putting the host in a monstrance above the altar, and come and worship, spend time in adoration and prayer.

I'm not against that. We need to have that kind of quiet time at times, but one Bishop wrote, "When I kneel before the Blessed Sacrament, and I continue to gaze at the Blessed Sacrament, I begin to see the poor in that Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. I begin to see the imprisoned and the immigrant." That's fine, but what I want to say is, "What Jesus really wants you to do is not see them in the host, but go out into the world and find them where they are. Go to them in prisons. Go to those who are fleeing their country because they do not have enough. Go to those who are hungry and the poor. There you will find Jesus."

I hope that we can hear this message and even as we celebrate, according to our liturgy, Jesus as King, that we will really try to understand how Jesus rejected the worldly notion of king, and taught us another whole way to live, the way of love, letting ourselves become servants of all, letting ourselves be the ones who reach out to the poor and the homeless, because there we will find Jesus. If we do this, if we really listen deeply to what Jesus tells us and try to follow Him, then what Paul says in our second lesson today will be very reassuring for every

one of us.

People were saying, "No, Jesus hasn't risen from the dead," and Paul says, "Christ has been raised from the dead, and He comes now before all those who have fallen asleep. A human being brought death into the world, but now a human being also brings resurrection. All died for being of Adam's race, but in Christ, all of us will receive life, life forever if we follow Jesus."

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich.]

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