NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# The church, like Jesus, should say 'yes' to new things

Thomas Gumbleton
| Feb. 23, 2012
The Peace Pulpit

I think it is most appropriate today to begin our reflection on the Scriptures by focusing especially on the first lesson, where Isaiah is trying to reassure people that God is about to do something new, if only they have the courage to respond to what God is doing. We should remember that these are people who have been driven out of their own city and land. Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was left in flames. They had to go off into exile, and were in exile for 80-some years. By now, they had become accustomed to the way things are.

Isaiah is preaching to them that it is time to go back and have your place again, and live where God gave you the land to be yours, but they were hesitant. They'd gotten used to the way things were. That's when Isaiah said, "Do not dwell on the past." They were thinking back to the time when Moses had led them out of Egypt, freed them from slavery and established the Jewish law. They were trying to hang onto that.

| Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time |
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| Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25 |
| Psalms 41:2-3, 4-5, 13-14 |
| 2 Corinthians 1:18-22 |
| Mark 2:1-12 |
| Full text of the readings [1] |

God said, "Look, I'm doing new things. Now it springs forth. Do you not see?" Further on, He said, "I have formed this people for myself. They will proclaim My praise. Neither have you satisfied Me with the fat of your sacrifices. Instead, you would burden Me with your sins and wearied Me with your offenses. I am the one who blocks out your offenses for My own sake. I remember your sins no more." God is saying to them, "There is a new opportunity now. Let go of the past. Be ready to follow where God is leading you now."

That's exactly, in the sense, what is happening in the Gospel today. Jesus is showing the people that God is really doing something new. We heard the story. Jesus is in this house preaching. It's packed with people to overflowing, blocking the door. No one can get in, and four friends lower a paralyzed man down through the roof to be at the feet of Jesus, and Jesus does something new. He is amazed at the faith of the four who bring the man, and the faith of the one who is paralyzed, and He makes note of them.

He expresses praise for their faith. Faith means not just believing a list of doctrines. It means your relationship with God through Jesus, and they are demonstrating that they are ready to accept Jesus, to follow Jesus. So He does something new. He doesn't demand that the paralyzed person go to the temple and offer sacrifices for forgiveness of his sins. He forgives the man's sins right there. "Your sins are forgiven." There is something new happening.

God is in our midst in a new way, in the presence of Jesus, and this is a beautiful and very marvelous thing, but we have to be willing to let go of the old. That's what the chosen people that Isaiah was speaking to -- they weren't ready to let go and to try to do something new. He was urging them, "Have courage. Believe. God will do something new." So Jesus comes into our midst, saying, "It's time. God is doing something new," and we, too, must try to follow Jesus as Jesus shows us the new things that God is doing.

This brings us right to today. God is doing something new in our midst also. It began in a very marvelous way, and some of us remember. Back in the early [20th] century when Pope John XXIII says, "It's time for a new Pentecost. God is ready to do something new in our church. Let go of the old, the structures that inhibit us. Become alive with the people of God. Do something new. Follow the way of God that is new." This led to many changes in our church, and we experienced them.

We are being encouraged as God's people to listen ourselves to God's word and to follow it. We haven't been doing that before in our Sunday liturgies. Up until that time, we didn't really have a cycle of Scripture readings like we have now. We read the same two Scripture passages week after week after week throughout the year. Every year it was the same thing. Now we have new passages, and we're encouraged to listen and take in God's word. Let it shape you, form you and change you.

So we try to do that now in our liturgy in a way that we didn't before, and we can't lose that. Also, God was saying through the council of this new Pentecost we have to change the structures of our church. Let all the people of God be ready to listen and to act on God's word, to participate in the decisions that are made within our church. Break down the structure of domination and hierarchy. Let there be more a church of believing people where everyone has the right to listen to God's word and to follow it, where everyone shares in making the decisions that lead our church in God's ways.

We've been doing that, but again, we seem to be somewhat like the chosen people who were in exile. We're afraid. We don't want to listen to new ways. Look at the problems that face our church. We have 30 million people in this country alone, let alone those in Western Europe and other parts of the world, who have walked away from the church, and has anybody in our leadership said, "Why don't we listen to them? Why are they walking away?"

No, that hasn't been done. The leadership of our church hasn't been listening. There are many reasons why the people walk away; many of us perhaps have been discouraged at times and find it hard to hang on, but we're not being listened to. God is doing something new, if only we'd listen and if our leaders in the church would listen. I came across this item just a week or so ago about Guatemala, a tiny country in Central America.

This has to do with the shortage of priests in our church. There is a part of Guatemala where the Kekchi Indians live, 250,000 people scattered among 350 villages, and they have only six priests. That's a dramatic shortage of priests, wouldn't you say? Six priests for 250,000 people, but that shortage of priests is everywhere. It's in our country. Why are we closing churches? We're closing churches because we don't have enough priests.

Why don't we have enough priests? Part of the reason is God is saying, "If you listen to the people of our church, that we ought to let go of the celibate priesthood." Let priests be married. We would have many, many more priests. We've even had a study of the Scriptures that says there is no reason in Scripture why women can't be ordained, but we don't want to listen to that so we rule that out. We end up with six priests for 250,000 people.

How could the church really live and flourish if we don't listen to what God is saying through the people of God? There are new ways to prevent the problems of our church if we would listen, be open to the spirit of God. There is a passage in St. John's Gospel where Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, who is

trying to figure out who Jesus really is and whether we should follow Jesus or not.

Jesus says to him something that we should listen to now. "The wind blows where it will and you can hear the sound that it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the spirit." The Spirit of God is at work in the midst of our church, but we have to be alert to that Spirit, listen to that Spirit and follow the ways that the Spirit is leading us, the new ways that God will make our church vital and vibrant and the church that God wants us to be, transforming our world.

This will require courage on our part and determination on the part of all of us, the part of our leaders; and so we are, I think, to listen with great care to what Paul says in our second lesson today. He says about himself, "I've always said, 'Yes,' and I don't go back on that because I am following Jesus, who is always saying, 'Yes,' to God." We might think it's easy for Jesus to say yes to God, to be faithful always to where God is leading him, but if we look in the Scriptures, we discover there are many times when Jesus found it hard to be faithful, to say yes.

Next Sunday in our Gospel, we'll hear in the first Sunday of Lent how right after Jesus has received His mission from God in His baptism, He goes into the desert to pray and reflect, and He's confronted with temptations to give up the way that God is leading Him. He has to struggle against those temptations to say "yes," and there are other times in His life when Jesus found it difficult to keep on saying "yes" to God.

We have to try to be faithful like Jesus and to say "yes" as God is speaking to us in our church today, and follow the new ways where God is leading us. It can make our church a renewed, vibrant, living church in small communities all over this archdiocese and throughout other parts of the world like Guatemala, to have communities that are alive and vibrant because we will listen to God's new ways leading us to an ever deeper renewal of our community of disciples of Jesus.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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