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Learn to listen to and follow Jesus this Lenten season

by Thomas Gumbleton
 The Peace Pulpit

The lessons today fit in very well with what we've been doing all day, trying to listen to God as God leads us into the ways of peace. As we heard the first lesson, it might not seem at first like one that would be easy to accept as a way toward peace. In fact, it's a very puzzling and difficult incident. What kind of a God would tell a father to sacrifice his son? What kind of a God would almost torture Abraham by putting him to this test which is beyond understanding?

I know that in the past when I have listened to that lesson or read it, I wasn't quite so astounded by it and put off by it as I suppose many people would be, but recently in Detroit, there was an art exhibition, *The Faces of Christ* by Rembrandt, and it was an exhibition that showed all of his great paintings. There were two in there that were this scene that we hear in today's first lesson. One was early in Rembrandt's career, and it showed Abraham ready to strike Isaac and kill him.

He's looking down at him and seems to be perfectly capable of doing it. I think that's the way I heard the lesson in the past. Somehow, Abraham should be able to pass such a test, but then there's a second painting by Rembrandt that he did much later, where he shows Abraham looking away from his son. He can't even look at him, and he has his arm with the sword turned away. There is a terrible anguish in his facial expression. In between those two paintings, Rembrandt had experienced the tragedy of losing two of his teenage sons. They died of the Plague.

So in the second painting, he is a father. You can sense that this is a father that loves his son. How can he be asked to do this? What kind of a God is that? There are different explanations that are given for this passage that do help somewhat. First of all, some Scripture scholars suggest that this even happened at a time when the chosen people were living among pagan people who didn't recognize Yahweh as their God

Second Sunday of Lent
Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18
Psalms 116:10-15, 16-17, 18-19
Romans 8:31b-34
Mark 9:2-10
Full text of the readings

and who practiced human sacrifice. So the incident -- it's suggested it's put there so that God is telling Abraham not to do it, not to do child or infant sacrifice. That would be wrong.

So it's a lesson against what it seems to be, God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. It's just the opposite. Perhaps that helps someone to accept this lesson. There are also those who say that God is beyond ethics, so if God wants, he can order such a thing and still be God. For most of us, that just doesn't seem possible. Not if God is love. We know that God is love. Jewish interpreters of the Scriptures suggest something else. They don't talk about Abraham being asked to slay his son, to sacrifice his son.

They talk about the binding of Isaac, that Isaac was bound to God through this experience. That might help somewhat because we are bound to God, and when we are bound to God, God is also bound to us. That's what the covenant is. God loves us. We love God. I am your God. You are my people. So we are bound together with God, and this is Isaac's experience with being bound. That's a possible way to think about the passage, and then put that in terms of what Paul said in the second lesson.

After seeing this, what can we add? With God on our side, who can be against us? Since God did not spare God's own sense, but gave him us to benefit us all, we may be certain after such a gift that God would not refuse anything that God can give. Here's where Paul goes on, and it wasn't in our reading today, but it's very important. Nothing, therefore, can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked.

"For I am certain of this," Paul says, "neither death nor life, no angle, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, not height nor depth nor any created thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus, our Lord." So that's what happens when we are bound to God. God's love is so all-embracing and binds us so close to God that nothing can separate us from that love of God.

Do we want to be bound to God in that way? I'm sure we do, but then we must do as God says in today's Gospel about Jesus. Listen to him. That's how we become bound to God, when we listen to Jesus. In that Gospel lesson, you remember in the vision that Peter, James and John, they see Moses and Elijah. Obviously, Moses is the law-giver, the one who represents the covenant of the Old Testament. Again, I will be your God. You will be my people. Obey these commandments. That's the covenant.

Elijah is the prophet, symbolizing all the prophets speaking down through the ages, through various prophets, until finally as we see in the Gospel today, in that transfiguration. Jesus is there, and Jesus sums up the law and the prophets, and takes us beyond the law and the prophets. You've heard that it was said of old, "Love your neighbor and your enemy. I say to you." Jesus pushes us past the law and the prophet. "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, to take it further."

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So we listen to Jesus. We commit ourselves to follow his way. Of course, as you noticed when I started the Gospel lesson, Mark said, "Six days later." What he was wanting us to remember was what had happened six days before, and that's when Jesus said, "The Son of Man will go up to Jerusalem, be handed over to his enemies, be tortured, nailed to a cross and die, be executed. If you want to be my disciple, you must follow me." That's the challenge that Jesus gave them just six days before.

Now they see Jesus, the fulfillment of the law and the prophet, and God saying, "This is my Son, my

Beloved. Listen to Him. Follow Him." So we are being called again today to all that we spoke about earlier, a call to follow Jesus, who will give his life out of love for all of us, who will accept to be persecuted, who will accept suffering rather than inflict suffering, who will be killed rather than kill, the Jesus who preaches to us the Gospel message of active love."

Listen to him. Today, we try to listen deeply to Jesus, and we accept that His way is the Way of the Cross, and we have confidence, trust in God, that that way of the cross will lead to new life. That way of the cross will lead ultimately, when we live it out, to go through death to new life, to the full Reign of God where everyone will live in peace. Everyone has a full human life. Listen to Jesus. That's what God asks of us today. We must respond, and through Jesus, begin to transform ever more completely our world into the Reign of God, to the way of the cross, the way of active love. Listen to Jesus. Follow him.

[Homily given at St. Aloysius Gonzaga Church, Washington, D.C. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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