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True prophets reflect the peace and love of Jesus

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 22, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the lessons today, it seems to me that what might be a very important question for us to reflect on and to draw more deeply from the lessons is the question, "What happens when we don't listen to God's prophets?" God, as you probably know, continues to speak to every one of us so that in some way we can surface God's will in our lives, and the normal way that God does that is through the prophets. This is so clear in the Hebrew Scriptures and in that first lesson of today.
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This was a time when the chosen people were struggling with the question of going to war. They were being threatened with an invasion, and they had a prophet among them, Jeremiah, who was urging them not to go to war, but as we heard in that first lesson from the Second Book of Chronicles -- and this is a book of the history of the chosen people -- the king at the time was young and heard this story and said, "What is displeasing to God?"

Fourth Sunday of Lent
2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23
Psalms 137: 1-2, 3, 4-5, 6
Ephesians 2:4-10
John 3:14-21
Full text of the readings [1]

He did not listen humbly to the prophet Jeremiah, a prophet credited by God's self. He also rebelled against the king, who was threatening to invade against the preaching of Jeremiah. Furthermore, the chronicler says, "The heads of the people added unfaithfulness to unfaithfulness, copying the shameful practices of the nations defiling the temple." God tirelessly sent them messenger after messenger, but they ridiculed the messengers of God.

They despised their words. They laughed at God's prophets, and then, because of their failure to heed, the invasion took place. The people were overcome. The Jewish army was overcome, and as the chronicler said, "The invaders burned down the temple, demolished the walls of Jerusalem and set fire to all its palaces, destroying everything of value in it." The survivors were deported to Babylon. There, they were forced to live in confinement, in exile, for decades.

It was a terrible loss, the loss of the temple, the loss of their land, the loss almost of their identity as God's people. They had refused to listen to the messengers that God sent. We hear what happened. So now we might ask ourselves the question, "Are we failing to heed God's prophets? Are we refusing to listen?" Of course, that's a possibility, but then sometimes, people will raise the question, "How do you know who is really the prophet? How can you tell a true prophet from a false prophet?"

Back in the time of Jeremiah, there were prophets who were telling the king just the opposite of what Jeremiah was telling him, but as Scripture scholars point out, every tribe, every palace had its own prophet, and those that lived and worked for the king said what the king wanted to hear. Those who were in certain shrines said what the priests wanted to hear. Again, there was the question, "Who was a true prophet? Who was a false prophet?"

Scripture scholars suggest that the way to discover the true prophet, the ones who really are intended by God to be the conscience of the people as a Scripture scholar said it, the way to discover that is by making sure that you

ask, "Does this person preaching take us back to the beginnings of our faith?" Authentic prophets are always concerned that we remember why our faith came into being in the first place.

They are especially good at pointing out to us additions or subtractions from the practice of our faith as it's been altered from its origins, and from division that was given at the very beginning. So we have to look for the words that take us back to the original, radical teaching that God -- and in our case, disciples of Jesus that God has given us through Jesus. Here is where our Gospel lesson today becomes very important.

Jesus says something in His conversations with Nicodemus that is clearly a very important part of the original teaching of Jesus, which goes right back to the beginning. Here he is, during his public life, carrying on this conversation. He says about himself, "The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert." That might seem a little bit obscure as we hear those words, but if we go to another part of John's Gospel, in the 12th chapter, we find Jesus carrying on a discussion with people who were not part of the chosen people.

They were outsiders. They were trying to find out who Jesus is. It's the last week of his public life, so they come to him looking for a wonder-worker, someone who could solve some of their problems or heal some of their sick, someone who is simply a wonder-worker. Jesus begins -- because it is so prominent in his own consciousness at the time -- to speak about what happened at the end of the week at his death and resurrection.

He talks about himself as being the seed falling into the ground, that only if it dies, can bring forth new fruit. It can rise and bring forth new fruit and yield a rich harvest. He goes on to say the words that we heard in today's Gospel: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself." In that part of the Gospel, John says, "By these words, Jesus indicated the kind of death he would die." He's talking about his death.

"I, when I am lifted up, hanging on the cross, helpless, powerless, will draw all people to myself." What is Jesus doing as he's being executed and put to death? He's pouring forth love on all of us, even on those who were putting him to death. He said, "Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy." He was loving, pouring fourth unconditional, unlimited, everlasting love that God has for every one of us.

Jesus is showing us this radical love, love even of enemy, giving up power, giving up violence, giving up hatred and only trying to draw to the power of love. Last Sunday, you may remember, we had that very extraordinary passage from St. Paul writing to the church at Corinth. He said, "Look, when I came to you, I did not come simply to baptize but to proclaim the Good News, the message of Jesus, the Gospel," and to do that not in terms of what we would call human wisdom, because here am I, preaching a crucified Christ.

Paul finds out, to the Jews, those who were being told, "This is the Son of God," and yet he was being crucified, that was a scandal, a stumbling block. They could hardly come to think of God being helpless, powerless, literally pouring forth love. So to the Jews, this is a scandal, the crucified Christ. Paul says to the Greeks, the so-called wise people, it was utter foolishness. It was crazy to think that this would be where God was calling us.

As Paul said at the final part of that passage, "The weakness of God is stronger than human strength. The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." So we have to try to struggle with this. The God who comes to us in Jesus and the authentic, original message of Jesus, the vision, is that in the world in which we live, where there is so much violence and hatred, that violence and hatred are overcome not by more violence and hatred, but by love.

Our world becomes transformed through that vision of Jesus, through that way of Jesus of returning love for hate, goodness for evil, peace instead of war. That's the authentic message of Jesus. So as we think about our own time, are there prophets who are telling us what is the real way of Jesus? There are. As you know, we live in this time of violence, and I'm thinking especially of the war. We've been at war since 1991.

We've lost thousands of our young people, but have brought about the death and destruction of the country of Iraq, the death of hundreds of thousands with millions displaced. Now the same thing is happening in Afghanistan for almost 10 years. Is anyone telling us this is wrong? Of course. In 1991, Pope John Paul II called for us not to go to war, like Jeremiah. He said, "I, myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf, repeated the cry, 'Never again war. No, never again war.'"

Not at this time or any time, ever again war. If we follow the authentic teaching of Jesus, we must say no to violence, no to hatred, no to war. John Paul also extolled us, "Violence is alive. Violence is not the Christian way. Violence goes against the truth of the Catholic church. No one must use violence. We must give up violence. It is not the way of Christ. It is not the way of the church. Only peace, forgiveness and love, these are of Christ."

That's taking us back to the authentic teaching of Jesus. There are many, many more examples in the teachings of John Paul II, Pope John XXIII and Paul VI. In fact, there is an extraordinary thing in one of the Peace Day statements that Pope Paul VI issued January 1st of 1976 for the World Day of Prayer for Peace that year. Paul VI called us to reflect, even though many of us do not want to do this, on the terrible action that our military perpetrated at the end of World War II, the use of weapons of mass destruction, the destruction of two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Tens of thousands of people were destroyed, innocent people. Cities were burned and destroyed. People were left for years lingering with radiation sickness, dying slow, terrible deaths. How did Paul VI describe that? He said it was a butchery of untold magnitude. Many of us don't want to hear this, but in fact, that's what it was. It was an act of terrorism almost beyond description. Innocent people were incinerated, burned to death, vaporized and destroyed.

What did Paul VI say should be our response? He offered for us the poor, weak man Gandhi, the model for our time. This may seem strange that Paul would turn to one who is not even a disciple of Jesus, but the example of that is in our lesson from the Book of Chronicles today, because long after the chosen people had refused to listen, everything had been destroyed and they were in exile. God brings them back, but God does this not through a believing, faithful Jew.

He does this through the pagan, a Gentile, Cyrus, king of Persia. He's the one through whom God roused the Spirit and brought the chosen people back to their promised land. The king, Cyrus, like the Hindu, Gandhi, are the ones through whom God continues to speak to us, and through whom God acts. Can we listen? Will we listen? I hope that as we continue to reflect deeply on today's lessons, that we hear Jesus calling us to that authentic way of his, an act of love.

As we reflect on what our modern prophets are telling us, starting with the popes, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and many other prophets in our midst who are saying no to war and yes to peace, forgiveness and love, we must listen to them. If we can, then surely God will not bring upon us -- or we will not bring upon ourselves -- the terrible consequences that the chosen people brought on themselves so long ago when they refused to listen to the prophet Jeremiah, the true prophet of God. Listen to God's prophets.

Have the courage to follow the way in which they lead us to the authentic teaching of Jesus, and pray that we have the courage to do what Jesus said to his first disciples when he talked about, "When I am lifted up, I will

draw all to myself. If you wish to be my disciple, deny your very self, take up your cross and follow me." The way of love is the way to transform our world, to end war and bring peace.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit. 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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