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Jesus teaches all humans how to listen to the God of love

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 29, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Last Sunday, you may remember we heard that short Gospel lesson from St. John that is so widely known, the 16th verse of the third chapter, John 3:16. The verse was, "God so loved the world that God sent God's only Son, and the Son so loved us that he gave himself for our salvation." When we heard those words last Sunday, perhaps they did not bring about within us an understanding of the price that Jesus paid. It sounds so simple in a way, "God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, and Jesus so loved us that he gave himself for us."

If we listen to today's lessons, we begin to understand how Jesus, because he was solely human -- I think this is what we forget sometimes. We think he's the Son of God, so of course he knows what's going to happen. What difference does it make? -- but he's fully human, and we get that spelled out for us in our second lesson today. In this passage to the church in Jerusalem, the people are told, "Jesus, in the days of his mortal life, offered himself with tears and cries."

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15
Hebrews 5:7-9
John 12:20-33
Full text of the readings [1]

He did not want to die. He did not want to go through torture, humiliation and agony. He was filled with tears and cries, and he prayed to God, "Save me from this death." Then we're told that God heard his prayer because Jesus had learned through suffering what obedience was. We usually think of obedience as doing the will of another, but the word really means to listen deeply. That's what the word means in its Latin roots.

Jesus was listening deeply in the midst of his suffering, listening to God, and once Jesus was made perfect, he because the source of everlasting life for those who listen to him. We, too, have to become obedient and listen. What Jesus would listen to, of course, as he's trying to listen to God, would be the words of God proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures. For Jesus, that was the basis of his prayer, all the Scriptures that had come down through the history of the chosen people.

One of the passages that he could well have been listening to was what we heard in our first lesson today from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, the kind of God that is revealed in that passage. As I mentioned before in introducing this passage, Jeremiah had been preaching to the people, "Don't go to war. That's not the way of God," but they did anyway. Of course, they were overwhelmed and their temple was destroyed. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. They were carried off into exile that lasted for decades.

Then, how does God respond to their lack of faithfulness? This is what Jeremiah proclaims. "It is God who speaks," Jeremiah says, "Not my word. This is God. I will forge a new covenant with the people of Israel, the people of Judah. They have broken the covenant that had been formed with them through Moses on Mount Sinai." You would think God would be punishing them and destroying them, but he says, "I will form a new covenant and it will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and lead them out of Egypt, for they broke that covenant, although I was their God."

Listen, this is the new covenant. "I will put my law within them, write it on their hearts." It's not just a law written on tablets of stone. No, God is going to enter more deeply with the people. "I will enter into their hearts.

I will write my law on their hearts. I will be their God. They will be my people. They will not have to teach each other, neighbor, brother or sister, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me."

God is saying, "I will reveal myself to each one, deep within their heart." That's what God is saying to every one of us. "They will all know me, from the greatest to the lowliest; for I will forgive their wrongdoing, no longer remember their sin." That's the kind of God who is revealed to us in those words of Jeremiah. The kind of God that Jesus came to understand was a God who was overflowing with love, the infinite, unconditional, unlimited love, so no matter what the people did, God reached out to them and called them back, and went even further than God had done before.

Jesus must have been reflecting on some of this as he approached these last days of his life. This was early in Holy Week that we hear about in the Gospel, when the Greeks -- these would be people from outside the Holy Land -- they are not observant Jews. They were outsiders, but they wanted to know about Jesus. There was a danger that they would think of Jesus as a wonderworker. He was well known through the whole area, so they were coming to him. They want to know him, but how deeply do they want to know him?

Jesus begins to tell this parable that we're so familiar with, because we've heard it so many times. Often, it's used at funerals. Jesus is thinking about his own death, what he has to go through, and I have a sense that because Jesus is fully human, he's trying to find some meaning in it. To be handed over and treated like almost nothing, treated with disdain and hatred, tortured, executed; how do you make sense out of that?

He tells the parable, "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains itself alone, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit, more fruit, everlasting fruit." So there can be some sense in what is going to happen to Jesus, and in his humanness, he is longing to have some understanding. He tells that parable, and I assume it was helpful, but then he begins to think again about what he is going to go through.

He cries out, "What shall I say? God, deliver me from this hour." He is almost begging God, "I don't want to go through it." That's the Agony in the Garden. "Not my will, but your will be done." Then Jesus, after he says, "God, deliver me from this hour," he's strengthened by God, and then he says, "But this is why I have come. God, glorify your name." Jesus has been listening. He hears from Jeremiah the kind of love that God has for all of us, and he understands that is the kind of love God has for him, and the kind of love that he has to pour forth on the world to heal all of us.

He says, "God, glorify your name." He proclaims, "I, when I am lifted up," -- that's on the cross -- "When I am lifted up, helpless, tortured, totally weak, then I will draw all to myself." It's the power of love that Jesus demonstrates, and that power of love can transform everything, transform each one of us, transform our world, if only we let that power of love come forth within us, and then we spread that power of love wherever we go. It's that love Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hurt you." It's almost unbelievable what he's asking of us, but it's exactly what he did for us. We were sinners when Jesus gave himself for us. Yesterday was the 24th of March, and some of you might remember that back in 1980, that was the day that Oscar Romero was shot to death, the Archbishop of San Salvador, an archbishop who had worked without limit for the poor, to bring justice into his country.

Because of his efforts for the poor, he was hated by those who liked the way things were, and finally, he was shot to death. Before he died, he had declared, "As a shepherd, if I demand my mandate, I must give my life for those I love." Then he said, "That is, for those who may be going to kill me. That's the way of Jesus: to give my life for those who hate me, who may be going to kill me." He told the reporter who was asking about this, "If in fact they kill me, you may tell them even now that I forgive and bless those who do it, those who kill me."

That's what Jesus did, isn't it? "God, forgive them." The unlimited love of God, that's what is being poured forth on every one of us. That's what we will celebrate as we move on into the last two weeks of Lent, as we remember all the events that led up to the death and resurrection of Jesus, as we go through that death and resurrection ourselves, being changed by this transforming power of God's love, and then being called to go out into our world and carry that love wherever we go.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish, 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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