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

We must mimic Jesus by spreading compassion for the less fortunate

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 2, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Now when we take a few moments to reflect on the scripture lessons today, to try to listen together to this word of God and let it enter into our minds, our hearts, our spirit, and transform us, we must first of all remind ourselves of something about the Gospels -- they are not biographies. They are not historians sitting down to write the facts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, they are theological reflections.

If we are really going to hear the word that this Gospel and the Gospels in general proclaim to us, we have to understand them for what they are. Over a period of time after Jesus finished his public life and was executed and rose from the dead, the communities of disciples began to reflect on who Jesus is and what their experience of him was as he entered into their lives now in this new way -- the risen Jesus.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Kings 4:42-44
Psalms 145: 10-11, 15-16, 17-18
Ephesians 4:1-6
John 6:1-15
Full text of the readings [1]

They began to collect the stories and the events of his life and to share them, giving witness to who Jesus is, and then gradually, they began to be written down. In each place where they were written down -- different communities: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- they were written with different perspectives and different purposes. John's Gospel, such as the part of it that we hear today, was written especially as a way of demonstrating who Jesus really is: crucified, raised and now present living in the community.

The focus is on who Jesus is and what he does for those who follow him. It's about the risen Jesus and trying to emphasize all the different events in the life of Jesus that point to who he truly is: Son of God, Son of God, not simply a human son of Mary. If we look at the Gospel lesson that today is from John, we will discover how John sees what is happening and describes it as a sign to tell us about Jesus.

The other Gospel writers have the same purpose, in general. They want us to know Jesus has risen. The others, especially Mark, really speak about Jesus much more in his humanness and emphasize that. John puts the emphasis on who Jesus really is, and you begin to understand this as you look at the different parts of the Gospel today -- the details that John puts into the event. These aren't in the other accounts. This particular miracle is the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels.

In fact, Matthew and Luke even have two versions of it, so it was a very important event. It's a very important part of the life of Jesus. But John sees it again as this sign, and so he adds in elements or describes it in such a way to help us again, to understand who Jesus is as Son of God. The first thing in John's account, Jesus goes up on the mountain. This isn't in the other accounts. It's all taking place on the plain -- the level of the plain.

Then, of course, for the Jewish people for whom John was writing, the Christians who had come out of Judaism -- all of them -- the mountain, of course, brought to mind right away Moses. So this Jesus is the new Moses, the lawgiver who went far beyond the first Moses. Jesus is seen then as leading the people on a new exodus or freedom journey. He's bringing them on a journey toward God in a way far beyond what Moses ever did. Then John makes a point to say that this happened at Passover time.

In John's account, he tried to make the people realize, and he does this in various places in the Gospel -- makes reference to the Passover time. He wants them to be mindful that he is associating this event with the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the source of the life of the whole community. Then he adds in another small detail: Andrew comes and says, "There's a boy here with five barley loaves."

Of course, what does that bring to our mind if we had been listening to the scriptures today? The first lesson: Elisha the prophet, when he has need of feeding a hundred people, he secures the barley loaves -- 20 barley loaves. He receives and he says, "Give it to the people to eat." There's 100 people and 20 barley loaves, so they divide it up and everybody gets a chance to eat. "They should eat," Elisha says, "and have some left," and that's a fact that happened. In John's account of this miracle, it's not 20 loaves for 100 people -- that isn't so extraordinary. It's five loaves for 5,000 people.

Jesus is the prophet going beyond all those great prophets of the Old Testament, even the greatest of them, John the Baptist. Jesus is now the prophet who takes us beyond any prophet that went before. This Jesus is someone extraordinary and very special. We discover that in John's account: All the people are so impressed, and they think of Jesus as the prophet who is to come, and so they planned to carry him off and make him king.

They're of course misunderstanding Jesus. They want him to be a warrior king like the great David in their history, to restore the kingdom of Israel and make it great again. Of course, Jesus can't allow this misinterpretation to happen that he would be that kind of a king. "My kingdom is not of this world," he says when he's on trial for his life. No, it's a different kind of kingdom. It's a kingdom where the one who is first becomes a servant of all. It's a kingdom where we find servant leadership not power, might and wealth.

In this episode that we hear in the scriptures today in the Gospel of John, if we listen to it deeply and pick up the hints that John gives us how through these details he wants us to see who Jesus really is -- the crucified, risen Jesus, present now in the believing community. If we reflect on that, we begin and will experience perhaps more deeply our own experience of Jesus as the crucified and risen Son of God, living in our midst and in our hearts. That's what the Gospel is supposed to do for us today.

We can get a different understanding, not that any of the other Gospels would make this miracle not a sign of the risen Lord, but to give us a deep, different application of what happened at this event, how it might impact our lives right now besides giving us new awareness of Jesus as Son of God. When we turn to Mark's Gospel (Luke and Matthew are very similar -- they're all three drawn from the same basic sources), it's the disciples who take the initiative. They come to Jesus and they say, "Look, the people have been here for so long -- three days now. They're hungry, send them home."

In John's Gospel, Jesus had taken the initiative, and it was Jesus who does everything -- guiding the whole event, making it happen. In Mark's Gospel, the disciples take the initiative. Jesus says, "What will we do?" The same thing happens -- he gets the loaves and the fish and he blesses them and then he tells the disciples to take and break them. You distribute them. You be the ones who carry out this act of mercy -- ?this act of compassion and love. You are the ones that will carry on the work.

That's a lesson for us. Before, the disciples of Jesus were with him, and now the situation in our world where there are people who are hungry -- extraordinary numbers of people are hungry or who have various kinds of needs. This event should teach us what our response to the needs of the people in our world must be: first of all, compassion. Jesus in Mark's Gospel says his heart went out to the people.

He felt this compassion. He wanted something to be done, and so immediately, he responds. One of the things I think that may be important for us is to realize how Jesus responds without judging. These are people in need. He doesn't judge them. Are they irresponsible? Is it their fault? Why don't they do something for themselves?

No, his heart immediately feels the pain, the suffering. He's feeling with them, suffering with them.

More and more, we need to cultivate that spirit of compassion so that immediately, our heart goes out to those in need in our local community, our national community and international community. We need that spirit of compassion. Then we have to do something about it. We have to do something. That's what Jesus said. Distribute, give what you have, take it and make sure everybody has enough.

We have a task, too. On an individual basis, when we see someone in need or we know there are people in need in our city, in our neighborhood, in our community, we should be taking an initiative to try to do something whenever it happens. It can happen to us at any time -- someone coming to us in need. We have to respond in a way that goes beyond simply providing immediate help. In our public life right now, three things are happening where it could make a huge difference in the life of the poor within our own country.

Before our Congress right now, there's a farm bill already passed by the Senate, one being considered by the House. One of the things that is going to happen with that farm bill is that subsidies for food stamps for the poor are going to be cut. In fact, in the House bill, it would be in the tens of billions of dollars. What's going to happen to poor people in this country? There are so many that are unemployed and running out of unemployment insurance, unable to get a job. Are we simply going to let them be abandoned or will we struggle to make sure that kind of cut doesn't happen, that we keep a safety net for the poor?

Wouldn't that be a way of trying to do what Jesus says: distribute, make sure everybody has enough? But also, the tax bill that's being considered -- we're considering allowing the richest of the rich among us to continue to get very high cuts in their taxes rather than letting that bill go by the wayside and provide it so that those tax cuts from a previous administration are abandoned. It goes back to a higher level of taxing and then allows for less taxing -- less taxes on those who have far less to try to bring about more of what happens in the Gospel where everybody has enough.

We need to have taxes to meet our common needs, common good, and those taxes should be imposed in such a way that those who have the most begin to share more with those who have the least. That's the way of Jesus, as we see in this miracle account. Finally, the other thing is the poor who need help and our compassion to go to them. Those who lack insurance can't get medical care, preventative care or the care for emergencies or sicknesses that come along.

We need to make sure that the great medical system that provides such good care for most of us would provide care for those tens of millions of people who don't have insurance, and who then by getting insurance through the bill that's already been passed, that they will begin to be covered and be able to get the medical care that they need. To me, these are the ways that we would be doing what Jesus directs in Mark's Gospel. You take care of those who are in need. Take this food, distribute it and make sure everyone has enough.

That's the lesson I think that we need to learn today. First, Jesus is Son of God. He calls us to follow him. Second, then we must act like him. If we're going to follow him, we must try to make sure that those who are in need among us that our compassion goes out to them and that we find the way to distribute the goods that God has given for all so that everyone begins to benefit from these blessings that God has given for all of us.

When we do this, we will be fulfilling what St. Paul tells us in the second lesson today: I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, bearing with one another in love, gentleness and patience. Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Be a true disciple, follower of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and son of Mary.

[Homily given at Our Lady of Hope Parish, Rosemont, Ill. 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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