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Beyond a human kingdom

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 17, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

There is something strange about that command at the end of the Gospel today where Jesus tells the person who is cured, "Don't tell anybody."

How is that ever going to happen? People know this man has been deaf and mute, now he isn't any longer, and they are rejoicing. They're happy. They want to spread this good news, but Jesus had a reason why. He insisted on this in other parts of the Gospel and in fact, Scripture commentators talk about this as the Messianic Secret.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalms 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
James 2:1-5
Mark 7:31-37
Full text of the readings

Somehow Jesus was trying to keep secret that He is the Messiah. The reason was that it was so likely and it happened so easily, that the people misunderstood about the Messiah. In fact, there are times when they want to make Him king. They think of Messiah as the one who is going to restore the power and might of Israel from the past and restore the kingdom like it was in David's time. So they really don't understand why Jesus came.

They want Him to be a Messiah according to their way of thinking.

If we go back to the beginning of Mark's Gospel, we can easily understand that Jesus had a mission, and it wasn't to establish an earthly kingdom. At the very beginning of the Gospel, Mark says, "Jesus began to[1] proclaim the good news: the Reign of God is at hand."

It isn't about Him. It's about the Reign of God. If we listen again to our first lesson today, it's extraordinary how Isaiah is describing an event that was going to be about the restoration of the people in exile in Babylon in captivity.

They had been carried away and lived there for decades. It's in beautiful terms. "Let the wilderness and the arid land rejoice, the desert be glad and blossomed, covered with flowers. It sings and shouts with joy. There will be fullness of life in creation." The Reign of God is being pictured here in very beautiful terms. Say to those who are afraid, "Have courage. Do not fear. See your God comes, bringing justice, fullness of life for people."

Isaiah is describing the Reign of God so beautifully. "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed. Then will the lame leap as a deer, the tongue of the mute sing and shout. Water will break out in the wilderness. Streams gush forth from the desert. The thirsty ground will become a pool. The arid land, springs of water where the saved of God will be turned with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will come to Zion singing, gladness and joy marching with them while sorrow and sighing flee away."

There is fullness of life. There is fullness in all of creation. There is peace and justice. The Reign of God is something so different from what the people in Jesus' time -- and even now in our time when we think about the kingdom of God, the Reign of God -- we so underestimate what God is choosing to do.

That's what Jesus is trying to be careful of, that the people don't misunderstand and try to bring about a human

kingdom.

No, it goes beyond that. It's God bringing all of creation into fullness, every person of all times and ages brought to a fullness of that person's humanness. The Reign of God, it's something tremendous, beyond our ability even to comprehend or describe, but that's the good news. In the Scriptures, in various ways, we have passages like this in Isaiah that give us some sense of the beauty, a fullness of life, of the Reign of God.

Not only is that part of the message -- the Reign of God is at hand -- that Jesus wants them to understand, but also right after this in the beginning of Mark's Gospel, the Reign of God is at hand. Change your lives. That's the message. Enter into this Reign of God even now, not just at the end of time but now. Change your lives. Live according to God's ways in the Reign of God.

That's going to take tremendous change.

The change is going to be radical within every one of us, and it won't happen for most of us all at once.

It's like this miracle in the Gospel today. It's a slow process and Jesus uses the laying on of hands to reassure the person and then touches his ears with His fingers, then takes spittle and touches his tongue. The person can hear and speak, but it's gradual. After this healing, there is a healing of a man who is born blind. Jesus does it in some of the same ways.

It's a slow process where gradually the man sees more and more clearly, until now he has the fullness of sight. That has to happen to us, not with just physical blindness, physical deafness or muteness.

It's a spiritual change that has to happen. We have to see in a deeper way, hear God speak within the depths of our hearts, and be able to proclaim God's goodness and love with all of our being. That's going to take time.

Our second lesson today reminds us of one of the kinds of changes that has to happen. It doesn't happen very easily. In the Gospel, it's so clear that Jesus is always reaching out to the poor, and He doesn't make these distinctions that the rich go here and the poor go there or are shuttered aside or forced out. No, Jesus includes everyone, and especially the poor. Jesus has a special love. God hears the cry of the poor.

In Jesus, that is so clear. He hears the cry of the poor. He gives them a special place. Look at what has happened in the community of Jerusalem to whom James has written his letter. "My brothers and sisters, if you truly believed in our glorified Lord, Jesus Christ, you would not discriminate between persons." Then he gives this example.

"A man enters the synagogue where you are assembled dressed magnificently, wearing a gold ring. Then at the same time, a poor man enters, dressed in rags. If you focus your attention on the well-dressed man and say to him, 'Come and sit in the best seat,' while to the poor one you say, 'Stay standing, or else sit down at my feet,' James says, 'Have you not made a distinction between the two? Have you not judged using a double standard? You give a special place of privilege to the rich and ignore the poor, push them aside."

That still happens. I have a friend in a parish here in the archdiocese, a woman, a mother of a rather large family, and a mother who loved her family and raised them well into adulthood. She was at daily Mass every day.

One of her children, Patrick, was mentally ill. He had severe schizophrenia and manic depression. Of course, there is medication, but as so often happens, people with mental illness sometimes refuse to take that medication.

They feel, "I can do it." Well, that was Patrick. In the neighborhood, near a suburb of Detroit, Patrick is a

homeless person living on the street.

You can imagine the agony of his mother when she sees him and wants to bring him home, but he doesn't want to go home. He's on the streets. He's mentally ill. Sometimes he comes into the church where his mother attends Mass. He's homeless. He's dirty. He probably smells, but he comes and sits in a pew in church.

Do the people make room for him? No, they don't like it, and they demand the pastor do something about it. The pastor tells Patrick, "You're not welcome." In fact, he puts up a sign that says, "Patrick" -- and he gives his last name -- "may not enter this church." Imagine. Can you think of Jesus doing that? No; of course not. Those poor people He welcomed, that He sat down and ate with, many of them were homeless people, street people, with dirty clothes and rags that smelled.

Jesus welcomed them and gave them a sense of their dignity and worth. He was trying, of course, to change things for them, but He first welcomed them and drew them in.

What about our community? Do you think we would act much differently from that parish where Patrick went? Would we really welcome the homeless? How many times have we even tried to go out and ask some of them to join us, come to our services?

No; we really haven't begun to live according to the Reign of God, but Jesus preaches that everyone has a dignity and a worth, and we should respect that, and help to draw these people out of their difficult situations. It may not always happen very easily at all. We have to first show that they are welcome. We need to include them and reach out to the poor. God hears the cry of the poor. We have to have that spirit.

So probably there are ways that we need to change our lives. Here is one other dramatic example.

A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine whom I've known for just a few years, but whom I came to know quite well and have profound respect for, died. He was a young man, probably in his early 40s. He had cancer and struggled. He tried to defeat it and win that battle against cancer for over a year. He kept going, but a couple weeks ago he died.

This young man is extraordinary. I came to know him after he had left the military service. He was an interrogator in intelligence services, and he was assigned to that Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

Now you probably remember the stories that came out of that prison and the pictures, how badly treated those prisoners were. They were humiliated and physically abused. This man named Joshua Castillo, his job was to interrogate them.

I heard him describe a couple of times his role. He would say the other soldiers, the guards and so on, would soften up the prisoner. They would beat them and try to get them so they would want to speak or tell whatever we wanted to find out from them. It was then Joshua's job to interrogate them.

He found it difficult from the very beginning that these people would be so badly treated, and he realized -- and he told about this -- that so many of them had just been picked up in a sweep.

Anybody who looked to be 18 to 30, young men, they would be brought in just in the hopes that some of them might have knowledge about where bombs were going to be set, IEDs and so on. They would be tortured and then brought to Joshua for interrogation.

He began to try to interact with them on a kind of human level, even though when you are in a war situation like that, they teach the soldiers to try to dehumanize the enemy.

Don't think of them as a person with a father, with children, a wife or so on. Then it's easier to do whatever you want, but Joshua began to talk with them and he got involved with one prisoner. Of course, these are Muslims and this prisoner began to challenge him. "You're a Christian. Do you know what Jesus taught? Do you really understand how Jesus taught reconciliation, forgiveness and love?"

This is a Muslim telling Joshua what Jesus taught. Joshua was taken aback by it and stunned. He actively began to really look into what Jesus taught. He discovered the depth in the teaching of Jesus that he had never experienced before, especially the teachings of Jesus about enemy love. Joshua was changed. It took a while, just like the blind man gradually seeing, or the deaf gradually hearing. He began to see and hear in a deeper way the message of Jesus.

He came to the conclusion that he could no longer do this work. He could no longer be in the military. He understood as he never had before that Jesus had rejected violence, killing, hatred and vengeance, and that the whole message of Jesus was to love the Lord, your God, with your whole mind, heart and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy.

Joshua began to really hear that message. He was changed, and so he had to leave the military. He could no longer carry on killing, even though he wasn't directly involved in the killing, but being part of the whole system. He sought conscientious objection. He wrote a beautiful statement about his own conversion, to what he came to understand was the way of Jesus: rejecting violence, rejecting war, rejecting hatred and vengeance, and reaching out even to your enemy with love.

I heard him tell that story a couple of times, and it's very powerful. I found it very inspiring, and I hope all of us here do also. We can get a message from it. That's what we have to do.

We have to try to overcome whatever blindness there is so that we really see Jesus as He is, and who He really is, and overcome our deafness to be able to hear deeply what God has proclaimed to us through Jesus. There is no secret about this message of Jesus, like when He tried to make sure they didn't misunderstand.

Don't tell everybody or they'll misunderstand. No; Jesus wants this message to be proclaimed, be heard, be seen and followed.

So perhaps today each of us has to look into our hearts and try to discover how much we really know Jesus, and how much we are really ready to follow Jesus.

Just as Jesus did cure the blind, the deaf and the mute, so Jesus can cure us, change us, and convert us so that we really see and really hear, and then we really begin to live the way Jesus challenges us: "Change your lives. The Reign of God is at hand. Enter into it by following My way, the way of love."

[Homily delivered Sept. 9 at St. Leo Parish in Detroit, Mich.]

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