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

Why should we stop those who work to bring the Reign of God?

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 4, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure we notice immediately the contrast, where last Sunday, if you recall the Gospel, Jesus had taken a small child, embraced that child and told his disciples, "If you welcome a child like this in my name, you are welcoming me." In a very gentle way, Jesus was trying to impress upon his disciples that it's those who don't really count because -- they have to be aware, as we reminded ourselves last Sunday -- in the culture in which Jesus lived in the Roman Empire's set of values, children were non-persons.

They had no rights. So Jesus is saying the least, the very ones who are not recognized at all even as persons, that's where I am. I am with those who are poor, oppressed, beaten down, those who almost are treated in society as if they are non-persons. I am with those people, and there you will find me. Jesus had done that because his disciples had been arguing about: In the Reign of God, in this kingdom he's talking about, who is going to be the greatest among us?

They are arguing, trying to say one would be great and the other one greater, and so on. That's when Jesus used the example of the little child. Now, in today's Gospel, I think you sense a kind of frustration on the part of Jesus. His disciples just aren't getting it. A couple of weeks ago, Peter had acknowledge that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Then, when Jesus said, "Yes, you have spoken well," Jesus invited them to follow him, but told them about how he was going to Jerusalem to take up his cross, suffer, be tortured, be executed ignominiously.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Numbers 11:25-29
Psalms 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14
James 5:1-6
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48
Full text of lectionary readings [1]

He said, "Follow me." Jesus kept on trying to impress upon the disciples that this Reign of God he was talking about, when it happens in its fullness, will be a time of full life for every person -- peace, justice, love and the fullness of God's reign -- but you only enter into it when you are ready to deny your very self, take up your cross and follow me, because that is when Jesus pours forth love upon all of us and all of creation, upon all of humankind.

Jesus teaches us that the Reign of God is so different because in the Reign of God, the commandment is, "Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, but love your neighbor as yourself." It's a Reign of love, and it means not just to love those who love you, but love your enemies. Do good for those who hurt you. Jesus is telling us we have to be ready to suffer rather than inflict suffering. Be killed rather than kill, because love has to be the way of our acting all of the time.

The Reign of God, Jesus says, is at hand. It can happen, but we have to enter into it by following the values of Jesus, and that's what the disciples weren't getting. They were still trying to decide who was to be the greatest. Peter was telling Jesus, "No, you don't have to give yourself over to your enemies. You've got power. You've got crowds following you. You can overthrow them." Jesus is saying, "No, that is not how you transform this creation that God has given us into the Reign of God."

We can't transform our earth into the Reign of God unless we follow the way of Jesus. Jesus is saying, "It's at hand," and yet, here are his disciples, not entering into it. They are not really understanding or accepting what he is saying, that it is a whole different set of values. In today's Gospel, Jesus sounds very harsh, but it is the

kind of thing that we would understand in physical circumstances. If we had a terrible infection in our leg and we couldn't heal it, rather than have that infection spread throughout our whole body, we would allow our leg to be amputated.

That's what Jesus is saying. If there is some way that you're refusing to enter the Reign of God, you must overcome that. Rid yourself of what it is that is taking you away from God's Reign, not allowing you to enter into it. He especially uses the marvelous symbol of the little ones. "If you reject even one of these, you are rejecting the Reign of God." In a way, St. James brings that out so powerfully today, how we fail in the Reign of God because we let our material things get in the way.

At the beginning of the passage, James talks about, "So, now for what concerns the rich?" He denounces them, "Cry and weep for the misfortunes which are coming upon you. Your riches are rotting, your clothes eaten up by the moths, your silver and gold have rusted. The rust goes into a witness against you. You deceive the workers who harvested your fields, but now their wages cry out to the heavens. The reapers complaints have reached the ears of the God of Hosts. You lived in luxury and pleasure in this world and felt happy while others were murdered by injustice and oppression."

In the Reign of God, we wouldn't be piling up wealth and riches just for ourselves. No, we would be finding the way that everyone could share in all the goods of the earth that God has given for all, not for a few. That's what it is in the Reign of God, where we are willing to work for full justice. We wouldn't have a wage system where people work full-time, many long, hard hours and yet are not paid enough to support their family.

An extraordinary number of people in our country live in poverty, even though they are working full-time. It's an unjust system, and yet, we allow it to go on if we're doing all right. That's what Jesus is talking about here. Look into your life, and if you are putting material wealth, piling up as much as you can, and putting that ahead of the Reign of God, then it calls for a dramatic change, and Jesus speaks about that very powerfully in the Gospel.

The real point of the message of this Gospel is for us not to take the Reign of God for granted, not to take for granted that we are participating in it as much as we could, but to look into our lives and see: Are we living according to the values of the Reign of God? Are we putting the least of the people first in our concerns? Jesus takes that child, embraces the child and says, "This is where I am, among the poor, the oppressed, the non-persons in our world."

James gives us that harsh challenge: If you are piling up riches and you are not working for justice, those riches will just rot. Today also in our Gospel lesson, and connected very clearly with the first lesson, we see how the disciples had an understanding somehow that they were part of an inner circle and they could determine who could be part of it and who couldn't. There is the example of John coming to Jesus saying, "Someone is driving out demons in your name. He's not one of us. We must stop that."

Jesus says, "No. God can work through others," not just through the inner circle, not just through those of us who are the elite in the community of the disciples of Jesus. The spirit of God is not bound up by our rules, our regulations. The spirit can work where the spirit will. God isn't bound by the rules we set up. The same thing was true in the incident from the Book of Numbers, our first lesson today.

Moses needed help to provide the leadership for the community as it got larger and larger; and so, God had devised this way that Moses would anoint others who would share in his role of leadership, and then the two of the people who were to be anointed weren't there at the moment. They were proclaiming God's message. They were acting as though God had given them the spirit until when Joshua comes to Moses and says, "You've got to stop that."

Moses says, "No. I only wish everyone would allow the spirit to work through them, everyone be filled with the spirit. God doesn't put limits on where God will work through God's spirit." We sometimes try to put limits on who can receive the eucharist, for example, not really allowing a person to look into his or her own spirit life and determine if they are worthy. We make rules, and perhaps in today's situation in our church, we find so many people being deprived of the sacraments because we say God can only work through certain people as ordained leaders in the church.

Isn't it time that we began to say perhaps the spirit is moving, is active among others that we have excluded, and that God is bringing forth the Reign of God through others that we would say are not capable? I'm talking specifically about ordained leadership. I read an article this week about the Archdiocese of Liverpool in England. This is the heartland of Catholicism in England, and yet, in that archdiocese, there has been a steep decline in the number of priests in recent years.

The clear situation is that by 2015 -- that's three years or less from now -- the number of priests will decline from 170 to 100. That's an extraordinary decline in the number of priests. What's happening? One priest is described as having three parishes he tries to pastor. This is just one part of the pastoral ministry. He has about 125 funerals a year. That's more than two a week, and to really be pastoral and minister in a situation of people dying and being buried, it takes time, energy, emotional commitment and empathy.

It's just too much, and yet, we make the rules that say we can decide where the spirit is moving and we exclude those who feel called to priesthood because they are not males. Could it not be, isn't it almost clear that somehow, God is speaking to us, that the spirit is moving in the church in a way beyond what we had thought was possible before, just as Moses said to Joshua, "Look, you can't circumscribe where God's spirit is going to be and who is going to be filled with that spirit."

In the Gospel, Jesus tells John the apostle, you can't stop someone where God's spirit is working through this person. If that person is acting according to our way, acting according to the way of Jesus, if he's not against us, then he is with us. Could it not be that we could add, "If she is not against us, she is with us?" And yet, we hold to the rules that we make and decide who can be filled with the spirit in the sense of being ordained ministers within our community.

Jesus has made it so clear. The Reign of God is at hand, and Jesus points out within that Reign of God, we have to reach out especially to the poor, the oppressed, the non-persons in our midst. Also, in today's lessons, we're learning how within the Reign of God, the spirit is alive, active, moving and leading us in directions that perhaps we have not thought possible before.

At least I think we need to pray about this, reflect deeply and see if what is happening in our church in our time is not a situation that is very much like what happened in Moses' time, what happened in the time of Jesus, where people were filled with the spirit and acted according to the spirit, and Jesus said it cannot be stopped, must not be stopped.

Are we not perhaps at a time like that again, where we have to allow ourselves to consider that God's spirit is alive and is moving within us? It's time for us to recognize that spirit and allow the work of the spirit to flourish in our church and through our church to be the means that Jesus calls us to be, the means to transform our world into the Reign of God.

These scripture lessons today give us much to reflect on, and perhaps we'll find it very challenging, especially the part of James challenging us, regarding our sense of values with wealth and justice and fairness to all people, but also challenging us to really understand that God's spirit cannot be limited. God is moving in a way that goes beyond our imagination, perhaps, but it is clearly the spirit at work in our midst.

[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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