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

We know not the hour of Jesus' return, so we must be ready

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 26, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: Because of the Thanksgiving holiday, Bishop Gumbleton's homily from Nov. 18 was late to NCRonline.org. *The readings discussed in this week's The Peace Pulpit are from Nov. 18.*

We're approaching the end of our liturgical year. We always start that year the first Sunday of Advent: four weeks of Advent; Christmas, the birth of Jesus; and then on through his public life. We conclude it, as we are this year now, with reflections on the end of time, the end of human history. This can be kind of a discouraging or fearful sort of reflection, but if we listen deeply, we'll find it very hopeful and very strengthening.

But first of all, we have to understand the kind of language that's being used in our Gospel lesson and in our first lesson today. It's a language that goes with a scriptural writing we call apocalyptic. The whole book of Revelation, the book of the apocalypse, is written in this kind of language, and many passages in the Hebrew scriptures, especially in this book of Daniel, are written in this apocalyptic language. It's a language that was used at times of great stress, when the scribes, the teachers, were trying to encourage people at a time of persecution, a time of suffering, a time that seemed to be hopeless.

It's important to understand that much of the language is very symbolic. The visions are described as messages from angels and it's not to be taken literally, but if we listen to it carefully and try to enter into what's being said through those symbols and the visions and the coming of angels and so on, we, too, will be strengthened as the people at the time were.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Daniel 12:1-3
Psalms 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11
Hebrews 10:11-14, 18
Mark 13:24-32
Full text of the readings [1]

Our first lesson is a good example. God's chosen people, about 165 years before the birth of Jesus, were experiencing severe persecution. The people were being disbursed, destroyed; there was suffering everywhere. So the prophet Daniel reassures the people by telling them, "At that time, Michael will rise, the great commander who defends God's people. It shall be a time of anguish as never before since the nations first existed until this very day." But then, "all those names who are written in the book of life will be saved. Those who have acquired knowledge will shine like the bright like the brilliance of the firmament. Those who taught people to be just will shine as the stars for all eternity."

They will come through this period of persecution and suffering, and come to a renewal, a new time of fullness of life, of hope. That's something that had happened again and again to God's chosen people, so this is one more example of how God brings them through suffering and even death to a new life, a new hope. The same thing is happening in the Gospel lesson. The community for which Mark was writing is a community that had already experienced the destruction of the temple, and they were undergoing severe persecution. So it's in that context that Mark speaks about the end times, the destruction of the world where the sun will grow dark, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall out of the sky. The whole universe will be shaken.

But then there's this marvelous vision of the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. This is not a prediction or description, but it's a proclamation of hope. What we hear in this passage is the message that human history will not end without the universal human recognition of Jesus as lord of that history. Exactly when it will occur, what it will look like, we can't know, but what comes through loud and clear to the disciples

who are listening to Jesus is this: False messiahs, wars, persecutions, earthquakes, famines notwithstanding, followers of Jesus will be supported by the presence of Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. Out of all of this, the Gospel will reach all nations. That's the proclamation of hope that is being proclaimed through this message of today's Gospel -- the Son of Man will return and bring the fullness of life, bring the fullness of God's reign to completion. That's the hope that's provided for us, the assurance, the proclamation. It's for sure that this will ultimately happen.

In the meantime, there will be these times of suffering and persecution. We must come through each of them knowing that God is present through the spirit, and that that fullness of time will ultimately come. I find myself, when I reflect on these kinds of passages that seem so discouraging and in some ways hopeless, that the words of St. Paul to the church at Rome, which also in a sense are describing what Mark is saying today about the coming of Jesus. Writing to the church at Rome, Paul says, "I consider that the suffering of our present life" -- see, the persecution, the suffering that he experienced and that the church was experiencing -- "cannot be compared with the glory that will be revealed and given to us."

And it's not just for humankind and human history; "all creation is eagerly expecting the birth and glory of the children of God, for if now the created world was unable to attain its purpose, this did not come from itself but from the one who subjected it, but this created world that seemed not to be able to attain its purpose is not without hope. For even the created world will be freed from this fate of death and share the freedom and glory of the sons and daughters of God. We know," Paul says, "the whole creation groans and suffers from the pangs of birth. That creation alone, but even ourselves, although the spirit was given to us as a foretaste of what we are to receive, we still groan in our innermost being, eagerly awaiting the day when God will adopt us fully and take us to God" -- our whole being, body, spirit, mind, heart -- we will be drawn in to this fullness of God's reign.

That passage, for me at least, says what Mark is saying in today's Gospel, that the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory will bring this about, the fullness of God's reign. So it's a time of hope, it's a message of hope, it's a time for the people of Mark's church, who were experiencing this terrible persecution, to look beyond what was happening. The same thing in our world as we get discouraged over the violence, suffering, death, wars, famines, the terrible injustices that go on -- we have to look beyond that. Jesus is at work in our midst. The reign of God is, as Jesus proclaimed, at hand. The Son of Man will return. And as our Gospel lesson proclaims, Jesus will be recognized as the lord of history.

But of course, we get back to the point where we say, "But when? When?" We don't know, and Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that no one knows -- not even he knows -- when this fullness of life, the fullness of God's reign will happen. What do we do in the meantime? That little parable at the end of the Gospel today tells us: "Be alert, watch." When a man goes abroad, he gets his servants and puts them in charge, giving them orders to stay awake, to keep on preparing, so that's what we do in the meantime. We prepare for this fullness of God's reign.

An anniversary that we just celebrated two days ago -- perhaps you were not aware of it, but Nov. 16 is the anniversary of the day when, in 1989, the six Jesuits in El Salvador working at the University of Central America, and who had been leaders in the effort in that country to bring about structural change for justice, they were murdered together with the housekeeper and her daughter. They were staying at the home of the Jesuits that night for protection, and they were all brutally shot to death. Those Jesuits had been very active in the work of trying to transform that society in which they lived into one that would be just, overcoming injustice and persecution.

They had been attacked for that in articles and people denouncing them as being perpetrators of violence and destructiveness, and being naïve and utopian. It was the rector of the university, Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, who had proclaimed what their work was. He said, "No, we're not pushing violence, we're not promoting violence. We're not being destructive; we're trying to overcome violence and destructiveness. Perhaps we are utopian," he said,

"because we are a people of the Gospel" -- the good news of Jesus, that good news that calls us to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

There's what we are to do in the time between Jesus' first coming and the time when he will come again as the Son of Man and be recognized by all people, the whole human race, where everyone will know Jesus and the Gospel of Jesus will reach all nations. Until that happens, we must be engaged as Fr. Ellacuria and those other Jesuits, Oscar Romero and the other people in that church of El Salvador, in trying to overcome persecution, injustice, trying to make our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

Each of us has to determine in what way I enter into this work of Jesus. The reign of God is at hand. We can enter into it, live according to the values of Jesus, and discover the way in which I, each of us, will try to overcome injustice where we see it, try to bring compassion and love to the poor, the suffering; try to carry out the works of Jesus, where he proclaimed, "I came to bring good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, heal the brokenhearted, set the downtrodden free, and proclaim God's year of justice, God's year of favor, the jubilee when everyone has an opportunity of full human life."

What are you doing? What am I doing to bring that proclamation of Jesus to fulfillment, to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible? That's what we need to be doing during this time between. You and I must search out where there is injustice, where there is a need for compassion and love, and then bring, in our small way, the work of Jesus, enter into that work, and help bring it to its fullness. The Son of Man is coming. We know not the day nor the hour. We must watch and we must work to make our world ready for this fullness of transformation into the reign of God.

[Homily given at St. Leo Parish in 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.]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/14/2016 - 13:21*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/we-know-not-hour-jesus-return-so-we-must-be-ready

Links:
[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/111812.cfm
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup