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Letters from confirmation candidates enlighten Advent journey

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 6, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

You?re aware, I?m sure, that the word Advent means coming and during this season, we?re celebrating a coming of God into our midst in a very powerful and special way. First of all, we?re looking forward to celebrate the coming of Jesus that happened 2,000 years ago when the Son of God became part of human history, became a human just like us in every way except sin.

God entered into our midst; that?s part of what we celebrate in Advent. Also as the gospel suggests, we?re looking forward to that final coming of Jesus when he will come to establish the reign of God in its fullness and all of us will enter into a complete, full life of joy and peace and love and all of the universe will be brought to a completion, a perfection. We?re looking to that coming.

December 2, 2012
First Sunday of Advent
(Cycle C)
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25
1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2
Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

If we listen to the scripture lessons today carefully, we discover how God is telling us about these comings of God into our midst. In that first lesson from Jeremiah, as I mentioned, Jeremiah was with the people in exile and that was a very difficult time of great suffering. He kept assuring them that God is with you; God will bring you through this trial and God did. Then after they?re back in their own land -- they rebuilt the temple and so on -- Jeremiah comes in and preaches only he begins to look forward to a new intervention of God in their midst.

As we hear in these words, ?In those days and at that time, I shall fulfill the gracious promise that I made in favor of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make him who is the shoot of righteousness sprout from David?s line. He will practice justice and righteousness in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. You will be called God our Justice.? Jeremiah is looking forward in a vague way, but a real way to this shoot of David.

He?s thinking of the line of David, the great king, as a tree and that a new shoot is going to spring from that tree. It will be the perfect Messiah. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem too. The one to come is called God our Justice. As we hear those words today and we look back on who came -- Jesus, we see how clearly God came into our midst as a God of righteousness, a God of justice. In the gospel again, we hear about that second coming of God.

It can seem very frightening especially as Jesus describes the turmoil, the distress, and all the terrible things that could be happening as our universe undergoes this extraordinary change and all of us are brought into a complete union with God. He?s looking forward to that second coming of Jesus. These are the two things that we celebrate as we celebrate this season of Advent preparing to celebrate with joy how God comes into our midst, the Son of God becomes one of us.

It?s almost unbelievable that God would enter into human history and become one like us in every way except sin. We also look to that final coming with hope and with joy, not with fear. We don?t know when that?s going to happen and so we have this time in-between in which we?re living right now and what does God expect of us

during this time?

God expects us to try to deepen our commitment to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ because Jesus came into this world as the Son of God but also one like us in every way to transform our world. You may remember at the very beginning of his public life Jesus proclaimed, ?The reign of God is at hand.? This fullness of God?s reign is about to happen. ?Change your lives,? Jesus says. He?s preaching to us what to do in this in-between time. Change your life because God?s reign is about to break forth in this fullness.

We have to be ready; we have to become a part of that mission of Jesus to transform our world into this reign of God where there will be righteousness and justice. In fact, Jesus himself in the Gospel of Luke (a very familiar passage -- I?m sure you?ll remember it as you hear it) after he had gone off into the desert and fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, went through those terrible temptations, and then came back to Nazareth, his home town, he went into the synagogue and they gave him the scroll to read.

He stood up, unrolled the scroll and read it. Remember what he read from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61: ?The Spirit of God is upon me. The Spirit sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to set the downtrodden free. Proclaim God?s Year of Jubilee of fullness of life.? That was a very special time in the Jewish calendar -- the Year of Jubilee -- every 50 years.

This would be the time of Jubilee forever. A time of Jubilee was a time when all debts were forgiven. Everyone had a chance to, in a sense, start over. It was a time when people shared everything they had and lived together in a common beautiful life. That was the Year of Jubilee. Jesus proclaims these words of Isaiah, but then he says, ?This day this scripture passage is fulfilled, even as you listen.? So as you hear those words, Jesus is saying, ?I?m here to do this. That?s why I came -- to proclaim good news for the poor who are the vast majority of people in our world.?

Jesus is come to reach out to them and to heal the brokenhearted, to be merciful, kind, and compassionate to anyone who is hurting in any way, to set the downtrodden free, to make justice happen so people aren?t exploited and treated in dehumanizing and unjust ways. Then again, that Year of Jubilee he says, ?That?s why I came.? All of us have declared ourselves through our baptism and our confirmation that we want to follow Jesus.

We want to be his disciples and so isn?t it obvious we have to carry on his work. We have to enter into this mission of Jesus to transform our world. Yesterday evening, I had a confirmation ceremony at a church of St. John and St. Paul here in the archdiocese of Detroit and as often happens for confirmations, the candidates had been asked to write letters stating why they wanted to be confirmed to see if they really had insights into what this confirmation meant in their lives.

These kids are 14 and 15-year-old ninth graders in high school. They write the letter to me and so I read through them. This time I found a couple of letters that I found especially insightful. This is a 15-year-old youngster declaring, ?I?m ready for the sacrament because I truly understand the meaning of it and I am prepared. The meaning of confirmation to me is that I am saying ?yes? to God.? Isn?t that marvelous?

This youngster, a teenager, is saying, my whole life now I?m saying ?yes? to God. That?s what all of us have done through our confirmation if we?ve taken it seriously. Another youngster wrote, ?I think that confirmation is when someone is fully accepted into their own religion. It is also one step closer to being with God and becoming a complete disciple of Jesus.? Have we thought of that -- being a complete disciple of Jesus, carrying on his work?

Here?s the one that I thought was really extraordinary. This youngster says, ?In order for me to live as a

Catholic, I expect myself to attend Mass and become involved in my community and live a life that demonstrates that I wish to follow the way of Jesus given to me as the guide for me to follow.? Then he says, ?I feel committed to the church and as an individual who is others-directed enough that I wish to live my life for others and for the common good. I hope to do something with my life that makes a difference in the world.?

Isn?t that a marvelous thing for a teenager to be saying, ?Yes, I want to live for others. I want to live a life in such a way that I make a difference in the world. I enter into the work of Jesus.? That?s what all of us are called to do and that?s what should happen during this in-between time. Jesus came 2,000 years ago. Jesus will come again. During the in-between time, we carry on his work.

It?s a difficult task and difficult challenge, but if 15-year-old youngsters can make it their commitment, I hope every one of us here in this church can also make that my commitment, that I will follow Jesus. I will enter into his mission, his work and make the world a better place by making justice happen, bringing peace wherever I go or wherever I am. Finally, perhaps it would help us if we now and later listened again to the prayer that Saint Paul makes for all of us.

He prays for all of us this morning, ?May Jesus increase more and more your love for each other and for all people as Jesus increases our love.? Paul is speaking for you, ?May Jesus strengthen you interiorly to be holy and blameless before God on the day that Jesus our Lord will come with all his saints.? That?s a beautiful prayer that Paul makes. We all need to take it to heart and try to bring about the change in our lives that will make that prayer fulfilled for each of us.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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