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

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 14, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

The Gospel lesson this morning is taken from a part of Mark?s Gospel that is describing the beginning of the public life of Jesus. And as we heard, he experienced something new today. He was rejected. Even despised. And what must have hurt most of all, is that it was from his own neighbors, people he?d grown up with, from his own family. He was rejected because he began to carry out the role that God had called him to carry out: the role of a prophet.

When we speak about Jesus, we speak in terms of Jesus as priest, prophet and king. We have a feast day, Christ the King, to celebrate his being a king, but he is a king who ministers and serves and who is poor and weak, not like a king of this earth. We?re used to thinking of Jesus as priest because as we celebrate the Eucharist, we know this is what he did at the Last Supper, making present the offering of himself as he died on Calvary. But we do not often, I believe, think about Jesus as prophet. And so we do not often think of ourselves, as we follow Jesus, that we too must be prophets.

In fact, in the church, as a whole, we don?t give much prominence to prophets. You look at the category of the saints, and you find martyrs, you find apostles, you find pastors, you find virgins, you find holy men and women, but there?s no category of ?St. So-and-so, prophet.? And I think that?s partly because we misunderstand what it means to be a prophet. A lot of people, I?m sure, would say, ?Well a prophet is somebody who predicts the future, tells us what?s going to happen.? But that?s certainly something Jesus rejected. He would not, even in response to his disciples questions, ever try to tell them the future. They wanted to know ?When is the reign of God going to be established?? ?When will the kingdom be restored to Israel?? And Jesus said, ?I don?t know, and it?s not something for you to worry about anyway.?

See, that?s not prophecy, predicting the future, prophecy simply means speaking God?s word and speaking on behalf of God. Jesus carried out the role of prophet in a very clear and a very important way. He spoke for God. In Matthew?s Gospel, at the beginning of his public life we have recorded that long discourse we call the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus

spoke on behalf of God and God?s values, God?s way and showed us a radically different way to live in this world. That was prophecy.

He also prophesized by speaking through his actions. Last Sunday?s Gospel, in that event about the woman who had the affliction of bleeding, Jesus spoke to us in a couple of ways, by his actions. Remember how she touched his robe, thinking, ?If I just touch his robe, I?ll be cured.? And she was. But then Jesus wanted to know, ?Who touched me?? And she was afraid; she trembled, but finally came forward. Why was she afraid? Because Jesus was doing something that spoke very powerfully and it?s something we have to hear. He was saying that compassion, love, reaching out to people, is far more important than human customs or human law. He broke the law by allowing that person to touch him. He welcomed that touch. He broke the law by speaking to a woman in public. Those were evil laws. We?re very sure of that now, but not then. People thought that was the right thing to do, but Jesus said, ?No.? Very prophetically he was telling us that at times human laws might prevent us from following the way of God. And that can be civil law or it can be ecclesiastical law. So we have to be very bold and courageous. And listen to what Jesus shows us. Bold and courageous and following what he teaches us. You could go on through the Gospels and find many other places where Jesus speaks very prophetically, very powerfully, and where he acts in a very prophetic way, but I think you understand what I?m saying.

But one of the things that Jesus learned, as we heard in today?s Gospel, is the thing that Ezekiel learned: that if you are a prophet, you may be rejected, you may be ridiculed, you may be even pushed away from the community of disciples. It?s happened. Ezekiel found that when he spoke to the people in exile, they refused to listen to him, but God told Ezekiel, ?Whether they hear you or not, that is, whether they follow you or not, you must proclaim God?s Word, so that they will know that God?s Word was spoken in their midst.? The same thing is true now. Prophets who speak up in various ways following the example of Jesus, our prophet, are rejected, and yet we must have the same conviction and commitment that Ezekiel had and Jesus had, that we carry out our roles as prophets.

Later this month I?m going to be speaking at the national meeting of a group called SNAP. It?s the Survivor?s Network of those Abused by Priests. I think this is a very prophetic group of people. I think they are speaking out and telling us something very important. I?ve learned much from them because I?ve come to know many of them well. I find it very sad that they are pushed away from the church, at least by the leadership of the church, because they?re asking for justice and reconciliation.

What they?re asking for is something that Pope John Paul II spoke about in a very powerful and very beautiful way in his World Peace Day statement

of Jan. 1, 2002, the first World Peace Day after 9/11. He was trying to deal with the question of, ?How do you restore order in a world that is so overwhelmed by violence?? The kind of violence we experienced on 9/11. He says, ? I?ve often paused to reflect on the persistent question, ?How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence? My recent conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored accept by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true reconciliation are justice and that special form of love we call forgiveness.? Further on he says, ?Forgiveness is in no way opposed to justice, as if to forgive meant to overlook the need to right the wrong done. It is rather the fullness of justice, leading to that tranquility of order which is much more than a fragile temporary sensation of hostility, involving, as it does, the deepest healing of the wounds which fester in human hearts. Justice and forgiveness are both essential to such healing.?

And I find it so sad -- and I?ve experienced this myself -- that the catholic bishops throughout our country, where so many instances of this abuse have taken place, refuse to talk to the victims, refuse to provide justice for the victims. They reject them actually, push them away and it just intensifies their pain and their hurt that was so devastating when the abuse happened. I know that the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops and the bishops in individual dioceses would prefer that the people of SNAP just keep quiet. But I think they are being truly prophetic and for the good of the church. I think it?s important that we begin to listen to them. The deep hurt and the wounds that have been done to our church by this abuse that went on for so long will never be healed. They?re willing to forgive, I know, I?ve talked to so many of them, but there?s no restoration of the shattered moral order unless their forgiveness is joined by justice for them. If we?re looking for prophets in our church today, we can look to these people, so wounded in so many ways, I think, as prophets in our midst.

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I?m sure if any of us thought about it we could think of other people who do show us how to live the role of the prophet. At the end of the summer, Pope Benedict XVI is going to go to Germany, and he?ll be very close to the village where Franz Jägerstätter grew up. One person among the few in Nazi Germany who said ?no? to Hitler?s war, who was executed. He is a prophet in our midst and I pray that when Pope Benedict is there that he raises up his name as a prophet to teach all of us that part of what Jesus tells us is that we must reject violence, we must reject war. That?s a prophet -- Franz Jägerstätter. Many other people are prophets in our midst and I hope we might, all of us, think about who those prophets are and then try to model our own lives on theirs.

Perhaps, I can suggest a couple of ways in which we could be prophets. This morning before Mass, our Pax Christi group met. People in Pax Christi are committed to the way of nonviolence. We could join that kind of an organization and become prophetic also, even making perhaps the vow of nonviolence that they promote. If we struggle, all of us together as a community, to continue to make this parish community a very vibrant, living community here in this part of the city and don?t let our church be closed; if we struggle to continue to carry on the work of mercy that we do here in this community, we are being prophetic.

Didn?t Jesus say at the beginning of his public life, ?The Spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim Good News to the poor?? Well, all the times that we are here and we?re reaching out to the poor, we?re proclaiming Good News, a prophetic message to the poor so all of us can be prophetic especially if we continue our commitment to this parish, to make it alive and vigorous and strong. In our individual lives we also can find ways to be prophetic. We live in a world where wealth in our culture is made to seem so important -- as if the goal of our life is to become wealthy. If we act against that in our lives by trying to live simply, we are being prophetic.

This morning, then, as we reflect on how Jesus is a prophet -- and that?s one of his most important roles -- I hope that we will commit ourselves to follow Jesus in this role, as an individual but also as a parish community so that we can proclaim God?s Word by how we live, even more than how we speak. Our actions, our lives speak the Word of God if we?re following the way of Jesus, and so we pray that we can become, individually, prophets and as a community, a prophetic community of God?s people.

As God told Ezekiel, ?Maybe no one will listen but at least they will know that a prophet has been in their midst.? And that could be said of us. Perhaps no one will listen but if we live according to the way of Jesus as a prophet, then the world will have to know that God has sent a prophet into the midst of this world. I pray that we can follow our call to be prophetic.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/22/2014 - 11:21*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/fourteenth-sunday-ordinary-time