

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 28, 2006 | The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure that most of us have been following what has been going on in the Middle East during these past days. If you followed on television at all, you've seen the rockets going into Haifa, other places in Israel, killing people. But even more you've seen the bombing and the disastrous results of that. Thousands of people, mostly civilians, of course, many, many children killed, and hundreds of thousands having to flee their homes, they're on the road, without food, without water, without medicine. It's one of the most horrific situations that we've seen in the world in a long time. It's all there right in front of us.

It's the Jewish people, the circumcised, waging war and having war waged on them by the uncircumcised, the Gentiles. But listen again to what might have happened, could have happened, and began to happen, actually: St. Paul, writing to the Christians at Ephesus, says, "Remember that you were pagans, and the Jews, who call themselves "circumcised," called you "uncircumcised." At that time you were without Christ, you did not belong to the community of Israel, the community of Christ." Remember, Jesus was a Jew, that was his community and they did not belong to it) "The covenants of God and the promises of God were not for you, you had no hope. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have come near. For Jesus is our peace, he who has made the two peoples one."

The uncircumcised and the circumcised. Through Jesus, they've become one. Destroying in his own flesh because he gave himself up to suffering and crucifixion, that ignominious death on the cross where he poured out his love on all people. By doing that, Jesus destroyed in his own flesh the wall, the hatred, which separated us. He abolished the law with its commands and precepts. He made peace in uniting the two people in him, creating out of the two, one new people.

He destroyed hatred, and reconciled us both to God, making the two one body. That's how it was happening shortly after Jesus had given himself over to death, had poured out his love on all of us. The two were becoming one. His people and all the nations were becoming one in him. But what has happened?

It seems that what's happened is that we have lost our focus on Jesus. Remember Paul says, "It's Jesus who makes us one." Not a set of doctrines, not a set of laws or precepts -- it's Jesus. And isn't that what Jeremiah was talking about when he wrote about the time when the leaders of Israel were so unfaithful, were so corrupt, were thinking only of themselves, and Jeremiah promises, "God speaks: the day is coming when I will raise up to David a righteous offspring, one who will rule wisely and govern with justice and righteousness, then Judah will enjoy peace and Israel will live in safety. His name will be God our Justice." This is Jesus that God has sent into our midst; Jesus who came to make the two one; to end the strife and the hatred and the wall that separates one people from another.

And those early Christians -- the ones at Ephesus and the ones in other parts of the Middle East where the disciples first proclaimed the Good News and spread the message of Jesus - what they spread more than

anything else was the person of Jesus. When Mark wrote his Gospel and the other gospel writers wrote their gospels, they weren't simply trying to give a history of someone who lived between the years 6 B.C. and 30 A.D. They weren't just writing about the life of Jesus. What they were writing about was their experience of Jesus. So when we hear today's lesson, we are hearing about a community where they were at times hungry, tired, frustrated, discouraged. They were, as Jesus said, "sheep without a shepherd," but then they experienced Jesus -- his compassion, his reaching out in love, his caring for them. In today's Gospel, he begins to teach them. Next Sunday we'll hear about how he goes on to feed them, nourish them. It's Jesus, present in their midst, loving them. They experience that and that's what they begin to share with others, and that's how the wall was being broken down -- the wall of hatred. The two were becoming one because this community, who experienced Jesus, was sharing Jesus, not sharing a church, not sharing laws, not sharing doctrine, but sharing Jesus. And we seem to have lost that, I think.

What do you suppose is the image, maybe even that you have or that most people have, of the church? It's supposed to be the community of disciples of Jesus in which he shines forth, in which he is experienced, in which he is present for the world to see. But what do they see? Huge buildings, the Vatican palace, St. Peter's -- these are great and glorious things, but they're not the church, they're not Jesus. As shepherds what do we have? The college of cardinals, a hierarchy who aren't really in touch with their people. Do we really see Jesus shining forth in what we think of when we think of the church? I'm afraid not.

And that's why in the Middle East they have no image of Jesus there, at least through us, through our Christian community throughout the world, and so that wall of hatred has been built up again and we are destroying one another -- those who were far off, the Gentiles, and those who were near, those who shared in the covenant, the people of Jesus himself. It's a tragedy that we are not the church we are called to be.

Part of it is that we don't experience Jesus deeply enough and fully enough in our coming together and so we don't have Jesus to share wherever we go. We have a church that is so concerned about *how* you celebrate the liturgy according to certain rules, that it's impossible if you follow the rules to have really an experience of Jesus, the spontaneous presence of Jesus in your midst.

Liturgiam Authenticam is a rule and if you read it all you would be aghast at what is being imposed upon those who gather in the name of Jesus to celebrate in his presence. Or you have a set of doctrines that become all important and so you have people say, "Well, so and so can't come to church because that person doesn't really believe this or that." Whether that person experiences Jesus doesn't seem to be very important.

But in the beginning, when Paul was in Ephesus, when Mark was writing his Gospel in the community where he lived, they were people who knew Jesus, experienced Jesus, shared Jesus, and so the world was beginning to change and was being transformed into the reign of God. But we've lost so much that we have to recapture.

I thank God and I thank all of you, as I do in the bulletin today, because I do think that here, to some extent, we have been able to, well, not just skip the rules, but to sort of set them aside and really have a liturgy that makes Jesus become present. In case you haven't read it, I put a letter in the bulletin today and it's a sample of what I get very often:

Last weekend, I had the honor and privilege of attending Holy Mass at St. Leo for the baptism of my grandniece. As a Catholic for all of my 54 years, I must say I have never been so inspired by the experience of simply attending Holy Mass. The building, the magnificent artwork inside, the incredible music, these were wonderful. But the deeply Christian feeling of the Mass and the tremendous warmth of the congregation made an impression which will be with me forever.

Then he goes on to talk about his own parish where they're in the midst of a multi-million dollar building campaign to make improvements to their church building, "importing Carrara marble floors, mahogany throne for the celebrant and gold plated candle holders near the altar." And so he says, "[W]hat I would have contributed to [that] parish ? [I think] would more closely follow the teachings of Jesus if placed in the hands of a faith community like St. Leo." And so he sent us some money -- because he had experienced Jesus here!

So I am thankful for that and we should all be very conscious that that is what we do when we come together. If we celebrate with an awareness that the Word of God is the presence of Jesus, the community is the presence of Jesus, the minister at the altar is the presence of the Jesus, the bread and the wine become the presence of Jesus, but it's really Jesus who becomes present in our midst in all of those ways. We need to make that continue to happen and we must pray and work to spread this message in our church, throughout our community.

The more you and I can make Jesus visible to people -- not our doctrines, not our rules, not our hierarchy, but Jesus, make Jesus visible to people -- the more Jesus will be our peace, the more Jesus will help us to transform our world into the reign of God. And so I urge you, continue to come with your spirit of faith, continue to pray with fervor, continue to sing with joy. Experience Jesus in our midst, carry the message of Jesus, but even more, bring Jesus wherever you go and pray that this will happen throughout our whole church. Then wars like that in the Middle East will no longer happen. Jesus will truly be our peace and the peace for all people.

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