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Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 10, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

A few Sundays ago, perhaps you remember, we had the Gospel lesson about Jesus preaching in his hometown of Nazareth, and afterwards he was rejected. His own family, three of his brothers are mentioned by name, and his neighbors would say things like, "Well who is this? Who does he think he is? Isn't he just the carpenter's son?"

You see, Jesus was so fully human there was no visible indication whatsoever of who he really is. His being God was totally hidden from anyone's perception. It's probably hard for us to put ourselves into that mentality of the people of the time of Jesus. We would think that they would all be overwhelmed because he was a wonder worker and he went around healing people and proclaiming God's word and so on. But they saw him as one just like themselves.

And that went on, you know, as the Christian community began to grow and develop, people continued to remember Jesus as a really good man who did so many wonderful things. But it was hard for them -- except those who had the immediate experience of the risen Jesus -- it was hard for people to really know this is the Son of God. This Jesus of Nazareth, someone like us in every way, is the Son of God.

And so that's why as Mark wrote about Jesus and this experience that Peter, James and John had. In fact, all four of the Gospel writers put this incident in their Gospels. They wanted people to come to know Jesus was Son of God. In this experience, they draw from the Old Testament -- Moses and Elijah. Now for the Jewish-Christians of the time, those two names would immediately bring to their minds the law -- Moses gave us the law that formed us into the people of God, and then the prophets, all of those who spoke for God -- Elijah representing all of them. The law and the prophets. They appear and they speak with Jesus. But then they go away, they're gone. And what's the implication? Well, of course, it's that Jesus fulfills all of the law, all of the prophets, transcends it, goes way beyond it, because he's not just a law giver like Moses or not just any ordinary prophet. Jesus transcends the law and the prophet. Fulfills everything contained in the law and the prophet.

And that's why Peter is overwhelmed. Mark says he was filled with awe, amazement and just befuddled I'm sure. And so he suggests, "Let's build these three tents." And that, too, for Jewish-Christians, would immediately bring to mind the Festival of Tents that they celebrate every year. And what was that celebration? It was a recalling of the time when they were traveling through the desert and God was so powerfully with them, so Peter is saying, "God is here, let's build tents to show that God is present."

And then, of course, the scene climaxed, when they hear the words, "This is my Son, the beloved" -- God speaking. Jesus is more than one like us in every way, except sin. Yes, he's fully human but he's also Son of God. He fulfills the law and the prophet, transcends them, moves us into a whole new relationship with God. And if we really begin to grasp this: Jesus is like us in every way -- he experienced all that we experienced, he knew the frustrations and the difficulties of trying to deal with other people, he knew how easy it was to turn to

violence and to hatred and so on. He lived in a real world, with real people and he was really one of them. But he's also Son of God, and so God's words then mean so much. "Listen to him! Listen to him."

Do we really listen to Jesus? That is, I think, the question that confronts us today.

If we accept that he is Son of God and Son of Mary, he is both human and divine so he does understand our problems, our difficulties, all the situations in which we find ourselves, but then he gives us, because he is the Son of God, a whole new way to respond.

If we really listen to Jesus how different things would be, I think. I'm sure all of us are aware of one of the controversies that existed in our country promoted especially by Christians. This happened in Alabama where they had on the wall in the courtroom a listing of the Ten Commandments and the judge even refused to take it down after the Supreme Court said it should come down. He said, "I'm a Christian. We believe in God, we need God's Word there."

But what if he and others who promote something like that were really listening to Jesus? It wouldn't be the Ten Commandments. Yes, we accept the Ten Commandments, but we've moved beyond them. What would be the law of Jesus? Well, it's all summed up in the Beatitudes. What if on that wall in the courtroom (and I can't believe anybody would let this happen): "Blessed are the merciful." You're not going to condemn someone to death if you really listen to Jesus. Now maybe many of us have moved to that point where we would reject execution, the death penalty, because Jesus would never, ever put someone to death. Blessed are the merciful. Or if we really listen to Jesus would our response to what is happening in our world with regard to the poor and the hungry people be so lackadaisical?

In the bulletin today, I list some of what I spoke about last week about the situation in Haiti where our twin parish is and where people are suffering extreme poverty. Their lifespan is less than 50 years because they grow up malnourished and hungry. A large percentage of the kids die before they're five years old -- it's all there in the bulletin, but we look at that often and we just move on. It should outrage us and it should fill us with a spirit of compassion if we listen to Jesus! How different was his response to the poor and the hungry. Or if we really listen to Jesus would we be at war in Iraq? And would we continue that war even into an indefinite future?

Just this week I read an article by Father Andrew Greeley, a priest from Chicago who writes a regular column. In it he says,

> The New York Times *reported that during recent months a hundred Iraqis die violently every day, 3,000 every month. In terms of size of population, that is the equivalent of 300,000 Americans a month, 10,000 every day. Yet the typical television clip on the evening news -- an explosion, automatic weapon fire, dead bodies on the streets -- has become as much a cliché as the weather report or another loss by the [Chicago] Cubs. The dead Iraqis are of no more value to us than artificial humans in video games. The Iraqis seem less than human, people with dark skin, hate in their eyes, and a weird religion, screaming in pain over their losses. Weep with them, weep for them?*

Not many of us even let ourselves be aware. As Andrew Greeley concludes his article he says,

> *The hundred who die every day are not merely numbers, they are real human beings. Their deaths are personal disasters for the dead person and also for all those who love them: parents, children, wives, husbands. Most Americans are not outraged. Iraqis are a little less than human. If a hundred people were dying every day in our neighborhoods, we would scream in outrage and horror. Not many of us are lamenting these daily tragedies. Quite the contrary, we wish the newscast would go on to the weather for the next weekend.*

If we really listen to Jesus we would take in this message from Andrew Greeley. How different would be our reaction, how different would be what we would do. I'm afraid that we don't listen to Jesus, he could not be indifferent to that kind of suffering, that kind of killing. So if we listen to Jesus, we must not be indifferent. We must demand that this kind of violence stop.

At the risk of going on a bit too long because it's hot, but I'll do it anyway, the other terrible situation in our world right now is what's happening over in the Middle East, in Beirut, throughout Lebanon, and Israel. Listen to what Pope Benedict a couple of weeks ago spoke about when he was reflecting on the Scriptures. This really applies to today's Scriptures too.

> *Jesus has triumphed upon the Cross. He did not triumph with a new empire, with a power greater than others and capable of destroying them. He triumphed not in an ordinary human way as we would imagine with an empire more powerful than others. He triumphed with a love, with a love capable of reaching even to death. This is God's new way of winning. He does not oppose violence with a stronger form of violence. He opposes violence with it's exact opposite -- love, love to the very end, his Cross. This is God's humble way of winning -- with love -- and this is the only way and it is possible God puts a limit on violence. This is a way that seems very slow to us but it is the real way to overcome evil, to overcome violence, and we must entrust ourselves to this divine way of winning.*

If we really listen to Jesus would we not be demanding that our government stop sending weapons, arming Israel so they can continue to bomb the people of Lebanon, totally destroy their infrastructure, kill hundreds of people. We must begin to listen to Jesus. It is the only way to bring his compassion, his love, his joy, his peace into our world. Listen to Jesus. Follow his way and the reign of God will really begin to break forth.

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