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Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 17, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

Last Sunday when we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus, we reflected on how that whole event was recorded in the Gospel of Mark and shared with Mark's community in order to help them -- people who knew Jesus so well, who knew Jesus as one of themselves -- to see Jesus as indeed the Son of God. Today's scripture from John's Gospel written for the community of John's disciples does something of the same thing.

"Those who were there began to murmur, because Jesus said, 'I am the Bread which comes from heaven.' " The people in the Gospel story were aware of Jesus of Nazareth. He was somebody they knew, someone they had watched grow up. They knew his family. They knew his brothers and sisters. And they say today, "This man is the son of Joseph isn't he? We know his father and mother, how can he say he comes from heaven?"

What John is doing in this passage is helping us to see that we have to look beyond the humanness of Jesus, just as those disciples had to. They had to get beyond the fact that they knew him, they watched him grow up, they knew he was fully human, they saw him get angry, they saw him laugh. And somehow they had to go beyond that and see that this is the Son of God. So John puts this whole event in terms that helped the people to see that this is God acting in their midst. Those people would have been very aware of Moses and the people traveling through the desert, and Jesus was with these people in the desert. In the desert, God had been with them and fed them with the manna. Jesus just fed them with an abundance of bread. Those are signs for those people, signs for us, that this is more than just someone human. This alerts us: this is God, acting in our midst.

Those people, too, would have been very aware as we were reminded today, of Elijah, the great prophet. Jesus was like Elijah. God had nurtured Elijah, fed him with bread as he was traveling through the desert, discouraged and ready to give up his life. God came and nurtured him and fed him. God was present, there in the desert. That passage reminds us that God is present in Jesus in the desert. So this is more than a human, this is the Son of God. And so as we reflect on these passages, we strengthen our conviction about Jesus. Yes, he's one like us in every way except sin. Truly like us, fully human. But the great mystery, he's also Son of God.

Today, Jesus tries to direct us further in our faith life. Jesus is not only Son of God, but he is a God who nurtures us, who gives himself to us in the form of bread, "I am the living bread." And of course if you remember from two weeks ago, when Jesus fed those thousands of people in the desert, Mark in the gospel had used words that recalled the Last Supper, "Jesus took the bread, looked up to heaven, bless the bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples." Mark was reminding us that Jesus does the same thing at the Holy Eucharist. We take the bread, we pray over it, we bless it, we declare what Jesus did, "This is my body. This is my blood." And so we're reminded that Jesus is present to us in the Eucharist.

This Son of God, who is fully like us in every way, but also God, becomes our food and our drink. We must try to make ourselves very alert to that as we come forward to receive the Eucharist. Our brother and also Son of God in power, comes to nurture us, gives us life, gives us strength. But Jesus takes us even beyond that. Not

only is he present as Son of God in this world, in the Eucharist, but he's also present in every one of us. Whoever lives and believes in him has his life. Jesus wants us to realize that God lives still in humans, in all of us, in every member of the human family.

Today, we will celebrate the baptism of our youngest family member, but what are we celebrating? We're celebrating the fact that we are now aware that this tiny baby is alive with God's life within her. We celebrate that as we pour the water over her, that God is already alive within her. We thank God for that. But we have to remember, as we continue to reflect on what Jesus teaches us through his presence there in that desert 2,000 years ago, about being a living person in our midst, in the form of bread, but also living within every person created by God. We have to remember that Jesus lives on in our brothers and sisters.

I came across a small article this past week, which I find very timely, although it was written a few years ago by Archbishop Hélder Câmara. I think it connects with what we're trying to grasp to our scriptures today. He was writing this reflection actually around Christmas time. Archbishop Câmara, you may know, was the archbishop of Recife, Brazil and was a very prophetic person in our church until he died a couple of years ago. But at this point, he wrote:

> "Now the time came for her to have her child and she gave birth to a son, her first born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

He's quoting Luke of course. Then he says:

> "In parts of the world, like ours here in Brazil, we live this Gospel scene for ourselves almost every day, because we are actually living through the drama of the land."

He says:

> "Big companies buy up acres of land in the country's interior and families that have lived there for years and years are then forced to leave. When they arrive in the cities, Recife for instance, they look for somewhere to live. Often the wife is pregnant. They end up building miserable hovels. You might even say, sub-hovels, where no one else wants to live, always, nearly always in the swamps. And there Christ is born. There's no ox or donkey, but there's a pig, pigs and chickens sometimes. That's the crib, the living crib."

He says:

> "At Christmas naturally I offer Mass in various churches, but I also visit and celebrate Mass in one of these living cribs. Why should I go on pilgrimage to Bethlehem to the historic birthplace of Christ when I see Christ being born here, physically, every moment of the day. The baby is called Joao, Francisco, Antonia or Maria, but the child is the Christ. Oh, how blind we are, how deaf we are, how hard it is to grasp, that the Gospel of Jesus is still going on."

I feel that's so timely because of what is happening in the Middle East right now. Think of those tens of

thousands of people who have had to flee their homes, undoubtedly there are pregnant women among them. They are living in makeshift shelters now, wherever they can find a place. That is Jesus being born in the midst of violence and suffering, death.

So when we think about what's happening in the Middle East right now, we must think about the fact that this is Jesus present in our midst, undergoing suffering, both in Lebanon and in Israel. And that's why it's so important for us to go beyond just wanting [peace] for the sake of our humanness and our brothers and sisters in the human family. This is Jesus, the Son of God, suffering there in the Middle East. So we must deepen or strengthen our efforts to work for peace, to end the violence.

I shared with you last Sunday, what Pope Benedict has written about, "violence is never the answer. It can't resolve that problem in the Middle East." Perhaps today as they accept the cease-fire, the Jewish Knesset is meeting today and they will accept it, it seems, there will be a truce. But we must pray and we must work in whatever way we can -- through our legislatures and writing to our State Department and so on -- to encourage this effort to go on until we resolve those basic underlying problems in the Middle East and bring true peace to this place where Jesus first came into our midst in human form.

Our Gospel lesson reminds us today that Jesus is the Bread of Life who comes to nurture us through the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also to nurture us as we give love and follow the way of love that St. Paul spoke about in our second lesson, follow the way of love in spreading his goodness, his peace in our world. It's important that we recognize Jesus as Son of God and son of Mary and understand that he lives on in every one of us, in all members of the human family. And we must work so that the life of Jesus will come to its fullness, so that the gift of his peace and his joy will come to its fullness in our world.

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