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Lent is a time to simplify life and live the way Jesus did

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 22, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

Now, to reflect on this Gospel in the Scripture lessons of today at the beginning of the Lenten season, it's important to put this incident of Jesus being tempted within the framework of the Scriptures that have already been proclaimed to us about the baptism of Jesus and the mission that God gave to him at his baptism. I'm sure you recall how, especially here in Luke's Gospel, the baptism is described as Jesus going down into the river, John baptizing him together with the other people who had come for this baptism of repentance, and then Jesus going up and going apart to be alone in prayer.

In that prayer, he experiences the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and he hears God saying to him, "Here is my chosen one, my beloved in whom I am well pleased." That passage -- we may not remark on it immediately, but Jesus would have because he knew the Scriptures. That passage is actually the beginning of the 42nd chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. It's a beautiful, powerful passage from Scriptures about the special servant of God and now we see in this passage Jesus as the servant of God. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit upon my servant and he will bring justice to the nations."

First Sunday of Lent
Deuteronomy 26:4-10
Isaiah 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15
Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13
Full text of the passages [1]

He does not shout or raise his voice. Proclamations are not heard in the streets. "A broken reed he will not crush, nor will he snuff out the light of the wavering wick. He will make justice appear on the earth." The passage goes on even further, but that's the key point that helps to understand now these temptations. Jesus has just been called by God to bring true justice to the nations, to all people everywhere for all time, to help every one of us to come into a very real relationship with God.

Justice means, first of all, that relationship with God where justice is holiness and entering into relationship -- union with God -- but it also means justice in the way that we're used to thinking of it: justice where everyone has a right and has opportunity to have a full human life. That's the right of every person, to share in all the goods that God has given to all and not to have some have very much and most have almost nothing.

Jesus is supposed to bring about a change in the way material goods -- the goods of the earth that God made for all -- are shared by all. Also, he's not to do it by using power or force or violence. He does not shout or raise his voice. Proclamations are not heard in the streets. By that, Isaiah is telling about a call to arms. The servant of God, the one in whom God delights, does not use force, violence or arms to bring about the changes that are needed. Instead, the servant is one who nurtures, who loves -- a broken reed.

The servant will not crush, but rather will nurture it gently, carefully, until it becomes whole again. The servant will not snuff out the light of the wavering wick, the tiny flame that is left in the embers. The servant will not snuff but rather, again, gently, carefully draw that tiny light into a fullness of flame. The servant is one who nurtures, who loves, who is gentle, and who rejects violence for any reason whatsoever. Now in that context, do you see what the devil is doing?

The devil is challenging Jesus: "Change these stones into bread. You're the Son of God. You can have all the wealth, all the material goods you want." Jesus says, "No, it's not by bread alone that people live." He would

add, as it was in the book of Deuteronomy because that's where this phrase comes from, "But on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

We live in a world that is saturated with advertisements that constantly call upon us to get more, have more, get something new, something better. So we end up in what we call a consumer society -- overconsumption. It's almost like a disease that afflicts us, and we keep on wanting more. That's why in the season of Lent we're asked to discipline ourselves, do some penance, restrict what we accumulate, what we make use of, deprive ourselves so that we begin to understand that it's not by bread alone that people live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

That affliction encompasses our whole church. It's so sad, isn't it, that we live in a church where we're taking our presence away from where the majority of the poor people are in the world. In our own diocese, we close parishes where the poor are; we merge them and try to say, "We're going to build one new parish." It doesn't work. Poor people can't just jump in a car and travel to another church.

We're so obsessed by the need to follow the demographics; as our communications director says, "Go where the people are," even though you leave the poor behind. In our personal lives, don't we do the same thing? We keep on getting more and more -- more than we need if we look at it honestly. We're not a church of the poor. We're not poor (not that Jesus wants us to be destitute), but rather again, just recognize that it's not by that wealth that we really find life and fullness of life. It's only by living according to the word of God; not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And power -- the devil wanted Jesus to worship him so that then Jesus could have all the kingdoms of the earth, all the armies, the military might -- use whatever force you need to do what you want, to have that power. We live in a nation that is obsessed. We spend more on arms supposedly in self-defense, but rather for wars of aggression, than the next 14 nations in our world combined. We keep on buying new so-called better weapons, more destructive weapons, because we want power.

We do that in our individual lives. So often, we dominate instead of being reconciling, gentle, loving and nurturing. In the church, we find the same thing. It's fascinating to me how people, now that Pope Benedict has decided to resign, think of this, and it is an extraordinary thing. Why should it be? The pope is a human being like all the rest of us. He is 85 years old, he is fragile, he is weak like any human being tends to be or starts to be, at least at that age.

Ordinary people, for the most part, just expect, yes, I'm going to give up these heavy responsibilities. I'm going to give up the burden of travel, the burden of trying to oversee a church of over 1 billion people. It's just an ordinary thing for an ordinary human being. But we mythologize the papacy, make the pope sort of a super person, and he's not supposed to resign like ordinary people, but yes, he is. That should just be the normal thing, shouldn't it?

We're a church of human beings -- a church of people, and the pope is one of us. He's bishop of Rome, yes, but he's a human being who becomes elderly and becomes diminished and needs to give up his role as pope. In our church law, we have even made the pope like a monarch. He has full power to make any laws he wants, legislate anything. He's a total judge in any situation in church law. He has all executive power in church law. He can name a bishop; he can fire a bishop; and he's done it.

Why do we allow this to happen when Jesus tells his disciples that they need to follow him and his way? His way is what he learned at his baptism, and he began to pray over and reflect on those six weeks of prayer in the desert. It's exactly what the devil was trying to tempt him to give up. These temptations of Jesus don't end; they go on in the church, where Jesus lives in each of us and in our whole community.

Each of us in our church community have to try to respond, become a church of simplicity, a church really in and among the poor so that we see the situation of our world from the perspective of the poor, and that we give up power and do not enter into worldly situations where we try to use power to achieve our goals. In our church, we still face this temptation that Jesus faced, and it's interesting and very important to realize the last words of the Gospel when Matthew says, "When the devil had exhausted every way of tempting Jesus, he left him to return another time."

Even at the very end of the life of Jesus, the devil was tempting him. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. You don't have to be subject to ordinary human frailty and mortality." Jesus was being tempted even then, but he rejected those temptations right up to the end so that he died on the cross without power, without wealth, and yet as he himself said, "I, when I am lifted up will draw all to myself, draw by love." As he's dying on the cross, he's pouring forth love on the world, on the universe, on all of humanity.

"I, when I am lifted up will draw all to myself." He refuses to retaliate, to seek revenge, to hate. He loves those putting him to death. That's why Paul would cry out in the letter to the Romans, "Hear my preaching, a crucified Christ." A crucified Christ: to the Jews, a scandal, a stumbling block. They could not conceive a messiah weak and helpless. And to the Greeks, the wise ones? Total foolishness. That's who Jesus is right up to the end, resisting those temptations, reaching out in love.

Today's message is a powerful message. If we really look at what was happening there, those temptations in the desert, and see them in the context of Jesus just having been called by God to carry out a mission to transform our world through love -- if we see this, we should reflect on it, and then try to follow the way of Jesus. One way to do that during this season of Lent is, yes, give up material things to some extent, discipline ourselves, give away alms, but also be ready to not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Spend time in prayer, especially quiet, reflective prayer, and reading the Scriptures, listening to the word of God. We have various booklets -- especially these little black books that we give out in the parish -- for six minutes a day to read and reflect on the Scripture of that day. If all of us begin to do this, if we really take the word of God as the bread of life, if we really nurture it and nourish ourselves with the word of God, we will begin to be more closely united with Jesus, understand his way, and even more important, we'll have the courage to follow it.

These Scriptures reveal to us who Jesus really is, what his mission is and what we must do to follow it, to carry out this mission to make the reign of God happen. Do not depend on bread alone, but every day listen to the word of God and keep it.

[Homily given at St. Hedwig Parish, Chicago. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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