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First Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 7, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

It seems pretty clear to me that we need this season of Advent -- a season when we can begin to stir up within our hearts and our spirits a very powerful spirit of hope, a spirit of encouragement, a spirit of joy. This, in fact, is what Advent does bring into our lives -- hope and joy. We need it, I think, at this time especially, because so many people seem to be discouraged with what is going on in the world and what is going on in our church.

The world we know is filled with violence; people hate one another. We're engaged in what seems to be an endless war; no one seems to have a way out.

But I think what troubles some people, perhaps not more deeply, but maybe on a more day-to-day basis, is some of the discouragement that they find in the church. I've had people say to me, "Why should I continue to be a Catholic? Why belong to the church?" They're looking for leadership and they're not finding it or they're finding a kind of leadership that seems to be pushing them away. There are a couple of things that happened at the bishops' meeting two weeks ago that many people found very discouraging -- married people being told, "If you practice birth control, don't come to Communion," almost as though we had never written back in 1968 a pastoral letter called Human Life in our Day which made it clear that this was a matter for individual conscience, made it clear that there is a right, and a responsibility even, to dissent within the church. Now all that seems to be forgotten. People are pushed away and told don't come.

A few years ago we wrote a very positive letter welcoming gay and lesbian people into our community. Now we published a new one that seems to say, "No, we say we want you, but, in fact, unless you change what they now call an 'inclination,' you're not very welcome."

We also find our church leadership failing to speak out on this violent war that is going on. And, throughout our country, but perhaps especially here in the archdiocese [of Detroit], we feel a lack of leadership as we find our churches being closed. All Catholic high schools except one being closed in the city of Detroit. And we hear our church leaders say, "Well, we have to follow the demographics. Our Catholic people are moving out; therefore, we go with them." Forgetting that this city of Detroit, among the largest cities, is the most poverty-stricken, where the church ought to be present more vibrantly than ever. Of course it is a very racist thing, too, because the city of Detroit where we are closing our churches is 83 percent African American so we're walking away saying, "We don't really need you or need to be among you."

So people are discouraged because of what is happening, but if we listen very deeply to the Scriptures today we will find, I think, reason to develop within our hearts a sense of hopefulness. We need to put ourselves into the time of Jeremiah when he spoke those words that we heard as our first lesson. It could not have been more discouraging for the people then. They had been promised by God that they would have leadership starting with

King David, who was the ideal king, and then they would have that kind of leadership. Now suddenly they don't. They find that one of their kings, Ahaz, is an apostate. Another is Zedekiah who is totally weak and incompetent, unable to lead the people. Jeremiah proclaims how the people need to be faithful to God and to the covenant, but they're not, so they're overwhelmed by the Babylonian army and carried off into exile.

And yet, in the midst of all that, Jeremiah is able to say, speaking for God, "The days are coming when I shall fulfill the gracious promise that I made in favor of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make him who is the shoot of righteousness sprout from David's line. He will practice justice and righteousness in the land. He will be called, Yahweh, our Justice, our Holiness."

That's a powerful image that Jeremiah is using because he could see what was happening. The leadership was deteriorating, and so they could picture it as, instead of a full, blossoming tree, just a stump. That's all that was left. It seemed to be dead. And yet there was to be a shoot that would come from that stump and give new life, break into new fullness. The shoot that was to come, this new life, of course, Jeremiah is looking forward to the time of Jesus. Jesus will come. The very Son of God will be that new shoot. God our righteousness, God our holiness, God our justice is Jesus. Jeremiah, Isaiah, the other prophets, could look forward to that and so they had hope.

And, of course, we're looking forward now, in the season of Advent, to remember once more that moment when Jesus came into the world -- where he brought the message of God's love, where he brought his way, his truth and his light for us to follow. So how can we not be hopeful if we commit ourselves to Jesus? The Gospel lesson makes it so clear. Jesus is talking about, first of all, the destruction of the temple that took place in the year 71 A.D. when the Roman armies invaded the Holy Land. Then he also projects that to the end of time.

But the end is also a beginning, isn't it? One thing ends, but then new life comes. As the world in our time in history, moves on, disappears, the Reign of God can break forth in its fullness. Jesus has come and proclaimed that the Reign of God is near. And then as God continues to be with us in Jesus, Emmanuel -- God with us, that Reign of God can come into its fullness.

And the Word of God, of course, is trustworthy. Jeremiah knew that, Isaiah knew that and so they knew that out of that stump of Jesse would come new life. That's what Jesus tells us. "Yes, there is an ending, but there is a new beginning -- we can have hope in that. The Reign of God is present in our midst," Jesus tells us.

In our second lesson today, St. Paul again instructs us what to do while that Reign of God is in our midst waiting to be brought to its fullness. "Love one another. Do good to one another," Paul says. A very beautiful passage. "For the rest, brothers and sisters, we ask you in the name of Jesus, we urge you to live in a way that pleases God. This you do, but try to do more. You know the instructions we gave you on behalf of Jesus. The will of God for you is to become holy. Let each of you love one another."

So while we're waiting for the Reign of God to come in its fullness, we prepare for it by deepening our spirit of love for one another. We can make that Reign of God happen in that part of the world in which we live, where we are, where we spend every day, by following what Jesus tells us, what Jesus showed us, by bringing love and goodness and kindness wherever we go.

This is the way that we will really celebrate Advent. Yes, we can be discouraged, but we can also have hope, trusting in God's Word. Jesus has come. He will come again. In the meantime he is with us as we make the Reign of God come into its fullness. This can be a season of great joy and also a season of great hope as we continue to listen deeply to God's Word and to try to follow more faithfully the way of Jesus and we'll discover a deep sense of joy and hope in our hearts.

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