NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Second Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 13, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure that all of us have noticed that at times people seem to think that what Jesus taught, what he preached, was not for our time and place, not the real world in which we live -- a world where evil so often seems to have the upper hand, a world where the moral order is shattered, a world where there is hatred, so much violence. The message of Jesus, we think, those values that he taught, they could not be for now. They must be for later, the afterlife. That's when you can really love your enemies. Do good to those who hurt you and so on.

Well if you listen to today's Gospel you realize that Luke is making a very special effort to help us to understand that Jesus came into this real world at a certain point in history -- a time when there was a lot of violence, a lot of killing, a lot of hatred. There was the Roman Empire with Tiberius as the emperor and the Holy Land where Jesus was born was an occupied land. Roman soldiers were everywhere. They oppressed the people. They put in puppets like Herod, his brother Philip and Lysanias. Even the religious leaders were corrupt. Luke mentions Annas and Caiaphas as the high priests. Well, there's only one high priest, but at that time Caiaphas was a figurehead. Annas was the power behind him. There was corruption in the religious leadership.

It was into this kind of world that Jesus came to preach what must be, sometimes, to all of us, an impossible message.

As we reflect on the Scriptures today and on what we're celebrating this season -- the new coming of Jesus into our lives and into our time -- we should make it very concrete. Jesus is coming now once more into our world, this year 2006, when there is not a Roman Empire but there is an American Empire that is trying to dominate the world. That is occupying a country in the Middle East, the very country where the Chosen People had been exiled to. It's a world in which we, as a parish family, face a very tremendous change that will upset us perhaps as a new leadership comes into our parish. It might discourage us, but it's the real world. It's a world in which anyone of us as individuals might be confronted with some specific problem, something happening within our family that is tearing us apart.

This is the world into which Jesus comes -- the very real world in which you and I live right now.

So perhaps we ask ourselves, "Can we have that spirit of hope and expectation, of joyfulness, that the prophet Baruch proclaimed so powerfully? Remember now: He is writing this at a time when the people are in exile, but he doesn't give up. Instead he says to Jerusalem where they had left -- the city that was destroyed -- "Put off your garments of mourning and unhappiness. Put on the splendor and glory of God forever ? For God will show your splendor to every being under heaven ? Rise up, Jerusalem! Stand on the heights; look toward the east and see your children gathered together from the setting of the sun to its rising by the voice of the Holy One,

rejoicing because God has remembered them." Here is a person living in the midst of a violent world, a world where so much suffering is happening and yet he has this tremendous hope. He has a vision of what will happen, what God will bring about. He's totally confident. And it does happen -- they return.

What is the basis of the hope of a person like Baruch? I believe that it's probably a prayer-life -- a life of prayer where he, or anyone like this, would begin to try to remember all that God has already done. And this is especially true within the Jewish tradition. Their remembering of how God had delivered them from slavery, from oppression, brought them through the desert to the Promised Land, made them God's special people. That was an experience that was deeply imbedded in their spirit-life, in their minds and hearts. They would always remember that. "If God can act like that in the past, surely God can bring new life, even in the midst of our terrible situation."

St. Paul, in writing to the Philippians, has such powerful and great confidence. "The good work God has begun in you, God will bring to fulfillment." Why did Paul know that? Because even though he was in prison and had been treated harshly and kept in chains (the prison where he was was a dungeon -- it was very harsh), because Paul had experienced God coming upon him powerfully when he was first converted, he could always remember and with confidence say, "What God has begun, God will bring to completion."

We need to pray during the season of Advent that we can have that kind of a solid hope, remembering all the good that God has already brought into our lives and confident that God who has brought this goodness into our lives will bring it to completion, to fullness. So we have hope, or we pray that we will have hope, during this season of Advent that this new coming of Jesus will bring about change in our world, bring about the Reign of God in a fuller way than has been present before.

But we not only need to have hope that we learn from Paul and Baruch. We must also listen to John the Baptist, the one sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus. John comes into our midst proclaiming, "Yes, Jesus is coming! The Reign of God is about to break forth into our world." But we must begin to change our lives -- to live according to the ways of the Reign of God. And it's for this world, it's for this time, it's for now, not some future time in the afterlife. No, it's right now that Jesus asks us, "Change your lives." John says he's preaching for repentance to bring about the forgiveness of sins. What he means by that repentance is a change in our lives.

Next Sunday we'll be celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and we've prepared for that and will be preparing for that during this week. I'm sure that for many of us that means, as we begin to prepare for the sacrament, to think about individual sins we've committed and how we have to try to be better and so on. And then we think that our repentance is trying not to do those things again. Well it should be deeper than that -- not just a listing of sins. We should be looking deeply into our lives. How closely do we follow the way of Jesus in this world, at this time? Are we really open to being changed?

There are two values of Jesus that if we take them seriously will dramatically change our lives. And they're very challenging; it's very hard for us in the world in which we live to open ourselves to this kind of conversion. The first that I think of is because of the country in which we live -- page through your newspaper and see how many pages of ads there are, or in a magazine or watching your television, one advertisement after another trying to draw you into a culture of wealth and affluence and excess where we have way more than we need. It's so easy to get into that.

The way of Jesus is different. He was born in poverty, he lived in poverty, he said, "Blessed are those who are poor." Can we make a greater effort to change our lives so that we don't just give into the culture that is so pervasive all around us; a culture of excess wealth? I know that sometimes we have to struggle to have enough, but we do have enough, all of us who are here, and it's so easy to want more and more and more. Somehow we have to follow the way of Jesus, the way of simplicity. And that will require, I think, a deep change in us.

The other change that we need is to truly commit ourselves to give up the way of violence. This past week, we're all aware the Iraq study committee submitted its report to the President, calling for us to withdraw from Iraq, in effect saying the whole war was a horrendous mistake. Probably most of us are ready to agree to that and say, "Yes we must withdraw, yes the war was a mistake." But are we ready to go further and say that *every* war is wrong? We never can go to war to kill, to hate, to do violence. The way of Jesus is a way of love only. It's not enough to be against this current war, we must be against any war, any violence, anywhere. That requires a deep change in us.

The change in us regarding wealth has to be a change of attitude first, the change within us in regard to violence must be a change in attitude first. We pray that we can change in our minds and in our hearts and then carry that out in a practical way in our daily life.

God calls us to prepare the way of the Lord, get ready for the coming of Jesus, and we can do that by undergoing this deep conversion. So we prepare this week that God will open our hearts, make us ready to follow the way of Jesus, the way of poverty, simplicity, the way of love.

We have already begun this journey, many of us, so it's a time when we must move further along, but we can do that with confidence, remembering those words that Paul wrote to his dearest friends at Philippi and writes to us today: "God has begun this good work in you and God will bring it to completion. All we need do, open our hearts, open our lives, be ready, and through Jesus, God will bring to completion the work God has already begun." We will continue, then, to be faithful followers of Jesus, ready to continue his work of bringing the Reign of God, the reign of justice and peace into our world.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/03/2014 - 02:07*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/second-sunday-advent