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Experience Jesus' presence to become a community of disciples

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 11, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

It always amazes me how the Gospel lessons that are assigned as they are for this particular Sunday every year, even though they are there the Sunday after Easter every year, they fit in so well with what we've been talking about all day. It's almost as though we had designed these three lessons for this evening, but they are the teachings for the whole church this weekend. They are very important and they do fit in with what we are talking about today: how to stop violence and build peace.

I referred to the bishops' pastoral letter throughout the day: the challenge of peace, God's promise and our response. In the very last part of this letter, a part that I think many of us may be unfamiliar with, but it's a very important part of the letter -- the pastoral challenge and our response. It's just the first part of it I mean, so in tune with what our readings are today. In this fourth part of the pastoral, we start off -- the bishops who wrote this -- recalling the first encyclical letter that John Paul II wrote after he became the bishop of Rome.

In that letter, he says, "Membership in that body" -- talking about the body of the church -- "has for its source a particular call, united with the saving action of grace. Therefore, if we wish to keep this in mind, the community of the people of God, which is so vast, so extremely differentiated, we must look first and foremost [1] Jesus saying in a way to each member of the community, the community of the whole church, 'Follow Me.' "

Second Sunday of Easter
Acts 5:12-16
Psalms 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19
John 20:19-31
Full text of the readings

It is the community of the disciples, each of whom in a different way, at different times very consciously and consistently -- at other times not very consciously and very inconsistently -- is following Christ. This shows the deep and personal aspect, a dimension of this community of disciples. In our lesson today from the Acts of the Apostles, we were reminded of how that first community began to gather, these disciples of Jesus there in Jerusalem.

They were experiencing the presence of Jesus in their midst, and they were doing what John Paul says every member of this community, down through all the ages, must do: try to follow Jesus. Then, when we do that, it sometimes causes difficulties for us, and that brings to mind the first lesson from today from the book of the apocalypse, where the disciple John -- not the Baptist or the apostle, but John the Seer, a different disciple -- has been persecuted because he's a follower of Jesus, part of this community.

He says, "I, John, your brother who shared with you in Jesus the sufferings, the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and witnessing to Jesus." He suffers because he has been a witness to Jesus. In the pastoral letter after we're reminded by Pope John Paul II that we are this community of disciples today, we read, "In the following pages, we should like to spell out some of the implications of being a community of Jesus' disciples."

Now, today in the time when our nation is heavily armed with nuclear weapons [and] is engaged in the continuing development of new weapons, together with strategies for their use, today it is clear more than any previous generation that this community of disciples are a minority in the world in nearly every country. In our own country, where we are coming to a fuller awareness that the response to the call of Jesus is both personal and demanding, just like John on the island of Patmos was telling those disciples, "We share in the suffering."

They were going against the Roman Empire, and because they were living out the way of Jesus, they were called to suffer. That's true of us if we really take Jesus seriously and his call. We, too, may be called to suffer in some way. Maybe it's even a choice we make at times to change our lifestyles so we can work for more justice for the people of the world so everyone has a chance for a full human life, or if we go against the government's wishes when those wishes call us to do something wrong.

We may suffer. People are in jail because they're opposed to public policies of the United States right now. So it could happen. Some of us may be called to such suffering, but what John the Seer also tells us is that we will have endurance. He experiences this because he's close to Jesus and he's able to endure the suffering that comes with being a disciple. We, too, can have that assurance as the disciple at Patmos says that we have the sufferings, but also the patient endurance.

Jesus will be with us to guide us, strengthen us and give us that assurance of endurance. The pastoral letter even spells out how to set ourselves on the road to discipleship is to dispose ourselves for a share in the cross. To be a Christian, according to the New Testament, is not simply to believe with one's mind, but also to become a doer of the Word, a wayfarer with and a witness to Jesus. So we must regard as normal if we really are disciples of Jesus in the time when his way is not being accepted; we must come to expect as normal even the path of persecution and the possibility of martyrdom.

That has happened, hasn't it, to Christians of our time? I have my Bible here, which I read every Sunday or every time I celebrate liturgy. There are pictures of martyrs like Oscar Romero -- it reminds me that that could be -- or Dorothy Stang, a sister who was actually proclaiming the Gospel when she was shot to death by land owners in Brazil who were opposed to what she was trying to do. So if we really become faithful disciples, we may face -- there is that possibility of persecution and even martyrdom.

The Seer of Patmos also tells us we experience the kingdom. He says, "The suffering, the kingdom in patient endurance." The kingdom is what is described in our passage from the Acts of the Apostles, that first community of disciples, were living together in Jerusalem. At this point, they're at peace in the Acts of the Apostles because that's the time before the Seer of Patmos is exiled to the island. They are at peace. They're living together. They're sharing all their goods.

They're experiencing the presence of Jesus. The reign of God is present. "The reign of God is at hand," Jesus proclaimed, and it has begun to happen there in Jerusalem. The reign of God is present now in our world. It's right at hand if we choose to enter into it by living according to the way of Jesus, and that brings us to the Gospel lesson today. To live according to the way of Jesus, what's the first thing he does when he comes into their midst on Easter Sunday night?

"Peace be with you." He's coming to bring about reconciliation. These are people who had abandoned him. Some had betrayed him. Some denied him. They all ran away, except for a few of the faithful women, and yet the first thing that he does when he comes into their midst is to greet them with a blessing of peace. He even repeats it. "Peace be with you." He wants them to know that in the midst of being this community of disciples, even if they're called to suffer, his peace is always there.

Then he also gives them the command. He breathes on them and then he tells them, "As God sent me to bring

about reconciliation and peace, which I share with you, now you must go bring that peace, that reconciliation wherever you are." The community of disciples of Jesus is the community of peace that brings peace, builds peace, shares peace by forgiving. "Whose sins you forgive, they're forgiven." If you can bring yourself to forgive, that evil is gone.

Also, we're called to restrain evil, and if we work at restraining it, God will support us and that evil can be restrained. We're called to do that by facing up to the evils in our world today, and trying to block those evils and transform this world to the love of God, into the full reign of God that we're called to be, the full kingdom of God. So we can listen to these readings in light of what we've been reflecting on all day today and see in them assurance.

Jesus is with us. He's present. He is the one who is making the reign of God happen. We're called to share in his work, to help to bring this reign of God about by working for the way of forgiveness, peace and love, which is the way of Jesus, bringing reconciliation and peace wherever we are, and trying to bring our larger community, our society, our world, into this realm of God, the reign of God, where forgiveness and love are God's way and made present.

In order for this to happen, I think for us to really be converted and to be able to carry on the work of Jesus, we must more and more become aware of his presence. We must experience the presence of Jesus, and I think there are two ways especially that we can do this, and it will strengthen us to carry on his work. One is by celebrating Eucharist together in community like we're doing this evening, and to be here where Jesus opens the Scriptures for us to hear.

If we keep on doing that, coming to Eucharist and being present as he opens the Scriptures to us, like he did with those disciples at Emmaus -- he opened the Scriptures and their hearts were transformed. They experienced his presence. We, too, can do that. Then there's the other way that becomes so clear in the Gospel today. Jesus wanted Thomas to see his wounds, discover him among the wounded, those who are damaged by the world around us: the poor, the outcasts, the forsaken, homeless people.

If we really want to experience the presence of Jesus is our world, we have to touch his wounds like he invited Thomas to do. "Put your hands in my side. Put your finger in the mark of my nails. Touch the wounds. See them." Where will you see them? Among the poor, the oppressed, the destitute and those rejected. Pope Francis has shown us, "Go out among the poor." There you will experience the wounded Jesus. He will be present to you and he will transform and change you as you work to bring his mercy and love where he is present so clearly among the wounded.

Those are the two ways in which we must and can experience the presence of Jesus. Here, now at this Eucharist with one another as he opens the Scriptures and we experience his presence in each other, but also by going back out into our world, reaching out to the poor, the oppressed, the neglected, the homeless or wherever. Touch the wounds of Jesus. Experience his presence. That will make us into this community of disciples that we're called to be, to transform our world into the reign of God, a world where peace, forgiveness and love are present for everyone.

[Homily given at Sisters of St. Dominic Conference Center, Houston. 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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