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We must follow Jesus to reach the reign of God

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 13, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

I was reminded again of an incident that happened with Pope Francis on Pentecost Sunday -- and perhaps I've shared this with you already, but it's so extraordinary that it's worth reflecting on again.

On that Sunday, as Pope Francis came out into the Square of St. Peter to celebrate the Sunday liturgy, about 200,000 people were there and they all began to cry out, "Francesco! Francesco!", and they kept repeating that. He smiled, and finally he calmed them down and said, "That's very nice. Very nice to be acclaimed, but," he said, "you should not be saying 'Francesco!' You should be saying 'Jesus! Jesus! He's the one! Jesus!' " and that's what comes through so clearly in today's Scripture lesson, that Jesus is the one who is all important.

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Kings 17:17-24
Psalms 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11, 12, 13
Galatians 1:11-19
Luke 7:11-17
Full text of the readings [1]

He comes before anyone else; the one who can turn our life around -- Jesus- -- and we get that as we listen to the Scripture lessons today. You see the parallel between what happens with Elijah and what happens with Jesus and the young man who's being carried out to be buried in the Gospel. There are some parallels. In both, the writer says, "He restored the son to his mother." Now, Luke uses those words very determinedly, or deliberately, imitating what Elijah has said or what the writer said about Elijah, "He returned his son to his mother," and so you begin to see immediately that there are parallels here.

In both instances, the prophet Elijah and the prophet Jesus take the initiative when the mother complains, or brings to Elijah's attention, that her son is very, very ill. He immediately goes and gets the child, carries him upstairs to his own room, and there he ministers to him: breathes upon him and prays for him. He brings the child back and restores him to his mother, alive and healthy.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus, too, takes initiative when he sees this widow and realizes that she has lost her only son. He immediately goes up to the structure, touches it, and he stops everything. He takes the initiative. But in this instance, he doesn't go to a lot of extra ministry. He simply says to the young man, "Wake up! Rise up!" and the young man gets up. He's alive.

Here the young child in Elijah's story was ill, very ill. Here, the man's dead. But Jesus says, "Rise up!" and he does. He restores him to his mother, and the reaction of the people, the mother in Elijah's story says, "I know now that a great prophet has come among God's people." In the Gospel, the people say about Jesus: "A great prophet has appeared among us. God has visited God's people."

They're recognizing -- and this is what Luke is bringing out -- how Jesus so far surpasses all the prophets. He's a prophet, but he surpasses all those prophets in the long history of the chosen people. He's not only a prophet, he is the son of God. He's the son of God: The son of God who has visited God's people, who's living there among them, who lives here among us right now -- the son of God, Jesus.

Pope Francis said, "Don't just recognize Francis. Recognize Jesus and acclaim Jesus because Jesus is the son of God in our midst." Now if we really begin to receive this, understand this, accept this -- the reality that Jesus is the son of God in our midst -- it should bring about great changes in our lives, shouldn't it? You know, if we really take Jesus seriously as the son of God, then every week when we come here to celebrate this eucharistic

liturgy, we should be coming to listen deeply to God's word, especially the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus, so that that word of God, the word of Jesus, will enter into our lives, change us, change the way we live.

Sometimes that might even mean a dramatic change. If we're kind of going along very routinely, not really understanding what it means to follow Jesus, we might need to make some really serious changes in our lives. Look at what happened to St. Paul. He's writing to this church in Galatia, and they're being told to reject Paul; he's not really an apostle. So Paul points out to them, "Look! I am an apostle because Jesus appeared to me, called me, sent me to proclaim the good news to all the nations, to the Gentiles, and that's why I'm doing what I'm doing.

"I was," he says, "a faithful Jew. I followed the law in its strictest interpretation. I followed the letter of the law strictly, but now I see. Jesus has fulfilled that law, going beyond that law, and I must follow Jesus," and so he changes everything in his life. He's no longer the Pharisee proclaiming the revelation of God is given to the chosen people, but going beyond that to the revelation of God given to us in Jesus.

There's so many things we need to learn about Jesus and what he teaches and how he acted. Just take today's Gospel and how compassionate he is. As soon as he sees someone suffering -- and what could be more difficult than a widow already in that time when a widow was practically helpless, with no support, and now she loses her only son -- so Jesus immediately reaches out in compassion and love, and that happens throughout his life. Every time we listen to the Gospels on Sunday, we'll find examples of how Jesus reaches out in love to people showing us how we must act.

Sometimes it means, too, a change in our thinking if we really understand who Jesus is and what he's done. This happened recently. There's so many things about Pope Francis that are really astounding that is quite amazing, but just a couple of weeks ago, he was celebrating the daily Mass -- as he does in the small church inside Vatican City where the people who work there and who live there, laypeople, everyone, come to Mass -- he says the daily Mass and he gives a short homily every day.

In one of the daily Masses, he said something about how God gives fullness of life and saves atheists. Can you imagine that? Somebody said, "Father, atheists?" and he said, "Yes! In Jesus, God saves everyone. Jesus didn't die for a few, Jesus died for all. He poured forth his love into our world on all people. There's no distinction; everyone is included."

Now some of us might have a hard time with that, and in fact, somebody said, "Well, what about no salvation outside the church?" and he says, "The church doesn't give salvation, Jesus does. We gather together as a community of disciples at the church, to love and praise and grow in the understanding of Jesus, but it's Jesus who gives us the fullness of God's life, not the church." That's a very important truth that Pope Francis has proclaimed, and we need to understand that, and I think, for some of us, it'll be in a change in our thinking.

Whatever it is, whether a change in our thinking, our attitudes, our way of acting, we must focus on Jesus. That's the message Francis says, "Don't say Francesco, say Jesus! Jesus! Focus on Jesus." If all of us do that as we listen to the Scriptures today -- and every week, and even during the week if we pray the Scriptures every day -- we begin to know Jesus better, and then we must try to follow Jesus. He's the unique fullness of God's life living in our world even now, in our midst. If we turn to Jesus and follow him, we'll begin to experience the reign of God in our everyday life.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. 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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