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# See the face of Jesus in the most poor and vulnerable

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 25, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

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As I mentioned before, that line in St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is quoted quite often. In fact, recently, one of our congregational leaders used it as a justification for cutting food stamps -- "People who don't work should not eat; cut the stamps" -- even though more than half the people on food stamps are children.

But that is misquoted because we don't take into consideration the context of these words of St. Paul, and this is true of Scriptures in general. Now, we have to reread the Scriptures, and we should. We have to be sure that we put what we're reading into the context of the time in which it was spoken or written. Paul wrote that passage -- that letter to the church of Thessalonica -- at a time when they were misunderstanding the message of Jesus about his return.

**Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time**
Malachi 3:19-20a
Psalms 98:5-6, 7-8, 9
2 Thessalonians 3:7-12
Luke 21:5-19
Full text of the readings [1]

People were beginning to think -- and this was around the year 50 -- and it was becoming a very popular idea: "Jesus is coming back soon. It's going to happen -- the return of Jesus. The final judgment of the world is near." So some of them said, "Well, what's the point of working? If Jesus is coming back, everything's going to be changed, transformed. The reign of God will happen. We don't need to do anything." Well, of course, they were totally wrong, and that's what Paul was writing against. He was doing it in that context, when people were misunderstanding about the end of time.

As we listen to the Gospel lesson today, too, it's possible for us to misunderstand this Gospel. I grew up, I remember as a child, always kind of not liking the last part of the church year when this Gospel is read, and that first Sunday of Advent, you get another kind of Gospel that seems to be about the last judgment, but it's really not about the last judgment in itself.

Luke was writing in the 80s, and so what was happening was happening right then and there within the Christian community. See, in 70, the Romans had already invaded the Holy Land, had destroyed the temple. There was not a stone left upon a stone when Luke wrote those words, so he wasn't looking to the future; he was talking about what was going on in their time, in that community. The chosen people -- or the Christian community -- had been dispersed. They were scattered, and there were wars and factions; terrible things happening.

So dramatically wrong is parents turning against children, brother and sister turning against one another; there was splitting of the community. They had come a long way from what you read in the Acts of the Apostles about the first community, where they came together in love.

No one was ever in need because they shared everything, and now already by the 80s, things were coming apart. There had been wars and famines and plagues and things like that, so that's really what Luke is writing about. And yes, he does use it in the Gospel to also project what will happen on down through the ages until the end of time, when Jesus returns.

If we understand this, then, in this way and put both of these readings into the right context and know that they're not about some distant future but they're about what was happening then, we can also see how this Scripture applies to what's happening now in our world. Well, there are these terrible disturbances in nature -- what just happened in the Philippines. This dramatic evil that has brought about the death of thousands of people -- wiped out whole villages -- and then there are wars and there's violence.

So we should begin to ask ourselves: "Well, why is this 2,000 years after Jesus has come? Why is our community here in this country so torn apart? So much disunity, so much violence?" That young woman killed on the porch of a person in Dearborn Heights [Mich.] couple weeks ago; a disoriented person -- unarmed -- shot through a locked door. Not a threat, but the man shoots first, then asks questions.

What kind of a society is that? Then just yesterday or the day before, I heard two young men accosted someone on the street and wanted his money. Well, he had a gun; he was licensed to carry one. So he gets it out and he goes to shoot, but he's shot first in the face. He's in the hospital; the two assailants run. When we use violence to try to stop violence, there's going to be more violence.

So in our own society, a lot of the things that are said there in Luke's Gospel are happening, and what Paul was saying is also happening. People are being deprived of food because we misunderstand what Paul said, and so what should we be doing at a time like this? It's not looking forward to the end of the world and dreading that, but what should we be doing about what's happening right within our society and within our world?

Well, I think what we have to do is what Luke and Paul both were trying to do in their writing to the communities to which they wrote: They were calling the community back to the original message of Jesus. That's what we have to do, and isn't that what Pope Francis is actually doing? By his words and his actions, he's calling us back to the original message of Jesus: a message of love, forgiveness, compassion, reaching to out the poor and the most neglected, a message of giving up violence. He said, "War is suicide for the human race," and yet we continue to prepare for war and wage war.

It's not the message of Jesus that we're living, maybe not even in our own personal family lives -- split and disagreements and so on. We have to bring ourselves back to that message of Jesus, a message of, again, compassion, forgiveness: "Love one another as I have loved you."

In a recent talk that Pope Francis gave, he said something that perhaps we can take away with us today as something that we really need to do that will perhaps begin to change in each of us, that will help to make us more faithful to the real message of Jesus. ... Pope Francis says, "Each one of us is invited to recognize in the fragile human being the face of Jesus who, in his human flesh, experienced the indifference and loneliness to which we often condemn the poorest."

If each of us began to try to look on every person, and especially the poor and the vulnerable, and see the face of Jesus, don't you think we would begin to change our attitudes, the way we act, the way we live? I think we would, and I think then we would be doing what Jesus has asked us to do: not to be idle, but to work to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible. See the face of Jesus in the most poor and vulnerable and reach out in love, and we will begin to change the world.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redmond, 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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