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Jesus is a king, but not a king in the world's definition

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 4, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

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Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King -- probably one of the most almost direct contradictions of the way of Jesus as we could find to celebrate. Remember in the Gospels the couple of times that people wanted to make Jesus a king and he refused? In fact, he went into hiding when he was in trial before Pilate. Pilate says, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus refused to accept the title: "You have said it, not I." Jesus rejected the whole idea of being a king and calls us also to reject this idea and to think of ourselves as being followers of Jesus, a king.

Some years ago, many years ago, Mohandas Gandhi -- the great Hindu religious leader in India who brought about a revolution, an overthrow of the British empire through active love, not violence -- said about Christianity: "Christianity has not failed. It's never been tried," and I think, as we celebrate this Feast of Christ the King, it's an evidence that we really back away from that idea of trying genuinely to follow Jesus.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

2 Samuel 5:1-3
Psalms 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5
Colossians 1:12-20
Luke 23:35-43

Full text of the readings [1]

What's wrong with calling Jesus the king? Well, there're three things in the Gospels [that] have been very clear that we identify with kingship, with someone who is a king. Kings have power; kings have wealth; kings lorded over others. Kings use force and killing to get their way. With Jesus, none of these is true.

Look at the idea of having power over others. There's that incident in the Gospel where James and John come to Jesus seeking the first place in his kingdom. They're thinking of a human kingdom; they want to be at his right hand and his left hand. Jesus is upset, and he not only rebukes them, but he calls all the disciples together and he says to them: "Look, among the Gentiles, those who are not part of God's chosen people, those that in power lorded over others -- lorded over others -- among you, it cannot be that way. The one who is to lead must be the servant, the slave of all."

Isn't that what Jesus showed them dramatically at the Last Supper, when he got down and knelt in front of each disciple and washed his or her feet? He took the role of a slave, a servant. He said, "As I have done to you, you must do to others. You must be servants." That's [not the way] kings and human kingdoms act.

Or take wealth: Kings are identified with wealth. They have everything they need. They draw money from the poor and build up their own wealth so they can always do whatever they want that money can obtain. There's that incident in the Gospel where the young man comes to Jesus and says, "What must I do to gain everlasting life?" When Jesus says, "Well, keep the commandment," [he replies,] "I've done that from my youth; my early years."

Then Jesus looks on him -- the Gospel ... says with love -- and says, "If you want to truly be perfect to follow me now, go sell everything you have. Give it to the poor then come and follow me. Don't depend on your riches any longer, your wealth. Follow me; live a life of simplicity -- of poverty -- having what you need, but not more than you need." In that Gospel incident, the young man went away sad because he had great possessions. He wasn't willing to let go, to not keep on trying to build up, accumulate wealth, get more and more and more.

Third thing: Kings use force. They go to war to get their ways. Jesus rejected violence. Look, even in the garden, at the risk of his life -- they're coming to take him prisoner, to torture him, put him to death -- one of his disciples says, "I must defend him. I must prevent this," and so he draws his sword and began to flail with the sword, slices off the ear of the high priest's servant.

Jesus says, "Put away your sword; don't use violence. Those who live by the sword die by the sword." Violence brings violence -- always greater violence -- and so instead of the violence, Jesus heals the person whose ear has been severed. He reaches out in love.

These are the ways of Jesus, and they are dramatically difficult. It reminds me of what the prophet Isaiah says when he says about God: "My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways are not your ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, my ways are above your ways; my thoughts above your thoughts." We can't just follow the ways of the world, the ways of our flawed humanness that want to dominate over others, that want to accumulate in wealth, who want to use force. "My ways are not your ways; my thoughts are not your thoughts."

Human kings follow the ways of the world, not the ways of Jesus. So it's really an anomaly, a contradiction, to think of Jesus as a king because right away, we think of those aspects of earthly kings -- power, wealth and force -- and make that Jesus' way. It's not, if we're going to follow the way of Jesus, really try to follow the way of Jesus: live Christianity rather than talk about it or hold it up as an ideal. What Gandhi says: "It's never been tried; it hasn't failed, it just hasn't been tried." Each of us is called now to try to live the way of Jesus and really change according to his ways, his thoughts.

Isn't this one of the reasons why we and the church -- and outside the church, throughout the world -- people are fascinated now suddenly with Pope Francis, the bishop of Rome, who, when he was elected, the first thing he did was bow, seek the blessing of the people. ... He wants to be their servant and, in a short time, he went to the prison, knelt down and washed the feet of prisoners. He's showing time after time how he reaches out to the poor, the vulnerable, the way Jesus did. It fascinates us; we rejoice in it because it's such clearly the way of Jesus, and that's what we're called to.

Or wealth: [Pope Francis] shows us the simplicity of life. He rejects the papal palace; he lives among ordinary people in a rented room and he goes out among the people to be with them. He chats with them; he interacts with them. He doesn't put himself above, and he lives this simple kind of life -- having what he needs but not excess -- and then he, like Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, has rejected violence as the way of Jesus.

Francis has said, "War is suicide of humankind. War must be rejected; violence must be rejected." Now, we live in a world, in a culture, that constantly draws us in a different direction. We live in a world where, in our culture, people do try to dominate over one another. In our individual relationships, we often seek to be in control -- to have the power -- and in our national/international relationships, we do the same thing. We try to be No. 1, our nation, so we can dominate, have access, and then this leads to the next thing: to excessive wealth.

Our culture tells us we must accumulate -- have more and more and more -- and our nation keeps on trying to build up its wealth, even using force to make sure we have access to the resources we want, decide we need. So we live in a culture that not only calls us to dominate, but also to accumulate wealth, and then to use violence.

I shudder every time, and it's happened more than once, when the president of the United States in a difficult situation, international crises of one kind or another, declares all options are on the table. What he means, of course, is that we're ready to use nuclear weapons in a nuclear war, start one. Do again what we did at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, sins that we've never repented of. We live in a nation that is ready to do just incredible, unbelievable violence: threaten the destruction, to destroy the whole planet and everyone on it.

What kind of -- I mean, how do you use a word to describe that violence? Paul VI tried: "It's a butchery of untold magnitude." That's what he said about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Our threat and determination to use such weapons continues to express the idea that we are ready to do this "butchery of untold magnitude" when we decide it's in our interests, and that kind of violence permeates our everyday life.

We're the most heavily armed nation in the world nationally, but even within our civil life, in our communities. People have guns and they're ready to use them quickly and without really a sense that killing is only going to bring more killing, either in international situations but also within our communities. Violence begets violence, so we live in a culture that goes against the way of Jesus.

This morning then, as we are called to celebrate this Feast of Christ the King, I think we must acknowledge that in so many ways, this idea of Jesus being a king goes against the genuine way of Jesus because he rejected power over others. He wanted to be the slave, the servant of all. He rejected excessive wealth; he wanted everyone to share in the goods of the world that God made for all, and not for a few.

Above all, Jesus rejected violence. He chose the way of suffering and death, showing forth love for those who were doing this to him. He was willing to suffer rather than inflict suffering; willing to be killed rather than kill, because he knew that the way of active love was the only way to transform our world into the reign of God.

So even though we celebrate Jesus as king, we must recognize not a king according to the ways of the world. He brings about the reign of God, which is where God's ways permeate our ways, God's thoughts becomes our thoughts, and this way leads to the fullness of life, peace in this world, and peace forever in the reign of God.

I hope that we can reflect deeply on these truths about Jesus, and as we celebrate this Eucharist, recognize that what we're doing we're making present on our altar the life -- the sufferings, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. If we follow his way, we will enter into that fullness of life, his risen life. We can even begin to live according to the reign of God now -- an experience of peace and the joy that is the promise of that reign forever.

[Homily given at St. Leo Parish, Detroit. 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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