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After baptism, we are called to serve through compassion and love

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: This homily was given Jan. 12.

At the beginning of the liturgy, Dave introduced the three readings in a very effective way by pointing out to us how they call us to allow ourselves to change -- to be open to change in our lives. I hope to reinforce what Dave said at the beginning as I reflect on these Scripture lessons with you, as we try to listen to them together and see what they're saying to us this morning.

Perhaps I can give some, and will try to give some, very specific and maybe challenging ways in which we have to try to change. But first of all, I think it's important, as we listen to the Gospel today, to realize that what we're being reminded of once more is the profound mystery that we celebrate in the Baptism of the Lord -- the son of Mary, but also son of God. Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Psalms 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10 Acts 10:34-38 Matthew 23:1-12	Perhaps I can give some, and will try to give some, very specific and maybe challenging ways in which we have to try to change. But first of all, I think it's important, as we listen to the Gospel today, to realize that what we're being reminded of once more is the profound mystery that we celebrate in the Baptism of the Lord -- the son of Mary, but also son of God. Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Psalms 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10 Acts 10:34-38 Matthew 23:1-12
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Now Matthew tells [us] that. You don't find this in any of the other Gospels where the baptism of Jesus is described, but Matthew does it because he wants to make sure the community understands that this Jesus, who is so clearly human, is also the Messiah, the anointed, the son of God. He does that by reminding the people who, at the time of Matthew, were still followers of John the Baptist and who had not really yet come around toward understanding and accepting Jesus as the anointed and as truly the son of God.

So Matthew wants us to understand this and to renew in our own minds and hearts our reflection on this incredible, almost impossible reality that Jesus is fully God and fully one of us -- sharing our life in every way, entering into human history, transforming it, and all the time being son of God.

But this baptism of Jesus is also something else, if we're listening carefully. It's an inauguration of the public life of Jesus. It's a moment from which he's going to, in a short time, begin to go out and do what St. Peter describes in that sermon in the second lesson: Heal the sick, bring forgiveness to sinners, comfort the afflicted, show compassion and love in every way. He's going to begin this public life.

Jesus, in this experience of his baptism -- and then as it's described in Luke's Gospel slightly differently, when he goes apart -- Luke says he goes apart and he's at prayer, reflecting on his baptism, when he experiences God saying to him, "You are my son, my chosen one, my beloved." From our first lesson today, we may recognize that those are the first words of that 42nd chapter of the prophet Isaiah: "This is my servant, my chosen, my beloved. In him I am well pleased."

But then Jesus would have known the rest of that passage. He learned his Scriptures by rote, as all Jewish children would have. We hear only the first line of the 42nd chapter in the Gospel. But in our first lesson, it goes on to say, "This is my servant, my chosen one, in whom I am well pleased. I put my spirit upon him. He will bring justice to all the nations." Listen to how he does it. He does not shout, cry aloud in the streets. That's a term in the Scriptures that would be a call to arms.

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So this servant is going to bring true justice, but not by shouting or raising his voice, not by proclamations in the streets. He will not call to war. That's what Isaiah is saying -- violence is to be given up, and he describes this poetically, but very clearly: "A broken reed he will not crush." You can picture a plant of some sort, a long stem, slightly broken. If you want it to heal, you have to nourish it carefully, gently, lovingly.

"Nor will he snuff out the life of the wavering flame." If you've ever tried to bring a campfire back to fullness from the coals, you know you breathe on them gently. If you blow too hard, they go out. So it again is a poetic way of saying gentleness, love, care. That's what the servant is going to be.

"He will not waver or be broken until he has established true justice on the earth." In other words, this servant is going to transform our world to bring God's fullness of life -- the justice of God for everyone. But he's going to do it in this unique way: through love, through compassion, through gentleness, never through violence or force, and that's the teaching of Jesus. That's how he gives it and that's how he began to make the reign of God happen.

Scripture's followers tell us that Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever. We know nothing about Jesus. In other words, it's so clear Jesus said no to violence. Absolutely no to violence; only yes to love. If he did not say that and we don't understand that, we may as well say we don't understand

anything about Jesus.

Jesus taught us how to die, not how to kill. He died; even if you're being tortured to death by enemies, loving the very ones putting you to death, that's what Jesus taught us. He's fulfilling those words of the prophet Isaiah, and this is what he accepts as he's baptized, and here are experiences -- God's spirit coming upon him, filling him with that spirit of God. So Jesus begins his work to transform the world into the reign of God.

But now as we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, I think it's important, and as we reflect on this experience of Jesus, it's important to realize that each one of us has been baptized into Jesus. That's what happened when we were baptized. We became part of the community of disciples of Jesus, baptized into his way. You probably haven't looked at the text of baptism in a long time.

Unless you've been to a recent baptism, you may have forgotten these very powerful words that are spoken when the priest anoints the one being baptized: "God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin, giving you a new birth by water in the Holy Spirit, and welcomes you into God's holy people. God now anoints you with the prism of salvation. As Jesus was anointed priest, prophet and ruler, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life."

Each one of us has been anointed with that prism of salvation -- anointed to be as Jesus was, priest, prophet, and ruler -- and we're priests when we gather together as we do here, celebrating this community liturgy. Each of us is exercising our priesthood in baptism. And we rule at times, overseeing others, but if we do it according to the way of Jesus, we do it not by lording it over others, but by becoming the servant of all -- a challenging way to be a person in leadership, to be the servant. Jesus made that so clear. That's what he was and that's what he called his disciples to be.

But also to be prophets -- to say the word of God to the world around us in words, but by the way we live. I think if we look at ourselves as the community of disciples of Jesus living in the world of today in the midst of violence that is so pervasive in our country, but also pervasive throughout the world, violence seems to be a way of life for so many people, including ourselves in ways.

Won't we have to ask ourselves, "Have we really listened to Jesus who rejected violence?" Back in 1991, Pope John Paul II, in writing an encyclical letter on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the first encyclical of modern times, the one by Pope Leo XIII on the rights of labor, John said in this encyclical of 1991: "I myself, on the occasion of the recent war and the tragic Persian Gulf, repeated the cry 'Never again war; no, never again war.' "

He repeated the cry. Who had said that before? Well, Paul VI in 1965, mindful of the terrible war that had happened and had ended not so long ago in Europe, and then also the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when we almost destroyed our planet. Paul VI had said, "No to war; never again war." But have we listened? See, they're really proclaiming the message of Jesus: "We must give up violence. We must give up war," and yet somehow we seem to continue to think that's the way we solve our problems.

Yet if we look at what's going on in the world around us, it's so true what John Paul said in 1991 after he proclaimed, "Never again war, because war destroys the lives of innocent people. Throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing, and always leaves behind a trail of hatred and resentment that make it all the more difficult to resolve the very problems that provoke the war," and that's so true. Who's being killed in these wars? Innocent people, and it continues to happen.

After we invaded Iraq in 1991, we completed that war quite quickly -- the air war, and then the ground war -- 12 weeks. But then we imposed 12 and a half years of sanctions, depleting the people of Iraq and

their resources almost totally so they could not ... a million and half people died because of those sanctions, half of them children. Then we invaded again, and that war continues to go on. People suffer and die every day in Iraq. Over 10,000 this past year have been killed in the continuing war that goes on. Over 2 million people have had to flee the country; 2 and a half million are displaced within the country.

War brings hatred and violence and killing; it never brings peace. But have we listened? Well, we try to listen today, and as Dave said at the beginning: "Are we ready to think outside the box where we've been confined for so long? Are we really ready to listen to Jesus, follow his way?" If we understand our baptism, that's what we're called to do: to be priests, prophets, and rulers that Jesus was -- to serve our world through gentleness, compassion and love so that we, joined with Jesus, in bringing true justice to all the nations.

We pray today that we can make those changes in our lives and in our thinking that will bring us into conformity with the way of Jesus, which is the way of peace and love.

[Homily given at Catholic Community of Relay, Md. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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