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Baptism of our Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 15, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

[Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at the confirmation ceremony at St. Timothy Church, Trenton, Mich., Jan 11, 2009.]

Maybe the first thing I should say as we begin to reflect on our scripture lessons today is how important it is for you to say yes to that question. When I say, "Do you wish to be confirmed?" and you say yes, what are you saying yes to? This is what's really important. You could think of it as, "Well, I'm saying yes to a ceremony. I'm going to be anointed with oil and people will pray over me. So I say yes to that ceremony and it'll be all over in 45 minutes or an hour and then we go, and everything is the same as before."

Well, that's not really what you're saying yes to -- not just to a ceremony. When you say, "I want to be confirmed," and I really hope you'll think about this as you come forward and I anoint you, you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying, "Yes, I want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I want to follow Jesus. I want to live according to his values. I want to share in his work of transforming our world into the reign of God where justice and peace will happen. I want to say yes to everything that Jesus taught, everything that Jesus showed us by his example. I want to follow Jesus."

That's what you're saying yes to and it's really the most important yes of your whole life.

When you say yes to Jesus, it's not just for a time; it's forever. You really are making a very important step in your development today as followers of Jesus. You're saying yes to everything that Jesus stands for. And if we listen carefully to the scriptures today, we'll get some real direction on what this means to follow Jesus, what it means to be anointed with his spirit. What I say now is especially for all of you candidates, but everyone else in this church has been baptized and probably almost all of you have been confirmed.

So it's an important time for all of us to think again about what it means when I say yes to Jesus, when I am a confirmed disciple of Jesus. We can get some special guidance today, not only because of the scripture lessons, but because of the feast that we're celebrating, the baptism of Jesus, as described in our gospel lesson today by St. Mark.

One of the things we have to remind ourselves of is that Jesus is like us in every way except sin. He was truly human. He was a member of the human race, one like us, so in his humanness, Jesus had to keep on trying to deepen his own understanding of his relationship to God.

I think most of us kind of gloss over what it means to say that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, god and one of us. As one of us, and Luke says it in his Gospel, "Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace." He grew in understanding, in his humanness. He had to become aware that his person, that he in fact was not just like every other member of the human race, but he was also son of God.

What happened at his baptism, as we heard described in the gospel today, was a moment (and in Mark's gospel, it's the first moment) when Jesus begins to know he is son of God.

That must have been an overwhelming experience for him, in his human consciousness, to suddenly discover he is son of God, God is well pleased in him. "You are my servant, my chosen one. In you I am well pleased." Jesus heard those words and began to understand he is son of God, the chosen one.

That's what I hope you will experience as you're confirmed today. Not that you become the son of God in the unique way that Jesus is, but that you become an adopted son or daughter of God. You become a brother or sister to Jesus because you share in his life through the spirit that he gives to you.

When Jesus heard those words, "You are my servant, my son, my chosen one. In you I am well pleased," that must have been an extraordinary moment when Jesus was overwhelmed with gratitude to God, God affirming him, saying, 'Yes, I am pleased in you.' But you see, if you are sharing in this experience of Jesus as you do through this sacrament, then God is saying to each one of you this morning, "You are my chosen one. In you I am well pleased."

See, God loves you. God is saying, 'Yes, I love you. I am pleased in you. I affirm you as my son or my daughter.' For each of us, that should be a source of great joy and gratitude to God because God affirms us in that way.

"You are my chosen one. I love you." God is saying that to each one of you, but then also, this becomes a challenge to live up to what this sacrament means for us. This is what it means for Jesus. In our first lesson we hear how the word of God becomes a life-changing word for him.

It's a word that brings him nourishment: Come to the waters and drink. Have the food, eat. The spirit brings nourishment to our spirit, quenches the thirst of our spirit, the hunger of our spirit.' But then also, the spirit challenges us: "My ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts. As high as the heavens are above the earth are my thoughts above your thoughts, my ways above your ways." Jesus heard those words and began to understand that he was being pointed, according to a certain path by God, to follow the ways of God, which are different from our human ways and many times very different.

Jesus would have noticed immediately one of the most significant ways of God because those words that God spoke to him were actually words taken from another part of the book of the prophet Isaiah. If you go to Chapter 42 of the Book of Isaiah, the first few verses start off this way: "You are my servant, my chosen one, in whom I am well pleased," and that's what Jesus heard God saying. But Jesus, because he would have known the scriptures, would have understood that that passage goes on to say, "And because you are my servant, you do not cry aloud in the streets," which is a way of saying you do not call people to arms, to war, but instead, my

servant does not break the bruised reed.

God says, My spirit is the spirit that nurtures and loves. My spirit is a spirit that reaches out to nurture, to bring forth life, to cause people to grow,' never a spirit of violence, never a call to arms. "Does not cry aloud in the street, does not quench the wavering flame or break the bruised reed." That's the spirit, that's the servant of Yahweh. So it means that we must try to follow a different way in our world.

This is probably the most important of all the values that we commit ourselves to follow when we say we're going to follow Jesus Christ. That is, to reject violence. Reject violence.

A few years ago, Pope John Paul II wrote a Peace Day letter for Jan. 1, 2002. It was the first World Day of Prayer for Peace after what happened here in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. That was an event that we all remember well, a terrifying event, and people around the world reacted to it. Pope John Paul II, a few months later when he published this Peace Day statement, said, "How, in a world in which the power of evil seems once again to have taken the upper hand, how will this world in fact be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph, a world in which true peace will prevail?"

That's a question we all must ask ourselves. "How, in a world where evil seems to have taken the upper hand, how will this world be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph, a world in which true peace will prevail?" In other words, how do we end the violence that's going on in our world. Right now, the violence that's going on in the Holy Land, the very place where Jesus was born and grew up -- it's being devastated by violence. Hundreds of people are being killed, massacred. How do we end that kind of violence? Or the violence that's going on still in Iraq where our troops are? Or in Afghanistan where more of our troops are? How do we end this kind of violence?

In the 20 century, over 216 million people were killed in conflicts. That's extraordinary -- 2,000 years after Jesus came, preaching a different way, we still carry on as though Jesus never came.

John Paul, in that Peace Day statement, goes on to tell us how we can transform our world. It's a message that we really need to hear. He says: "Recent events, including the terrible killings just mentioned" -- and he had spoken about Sept. 11 - "move me to return to a theme which often stirs in the depths of my heart when I remember the events of history which have marked my life, especially my youth."

He grew up in World War II under Nazi tyranny, then under Communist tyranny, so he was remembering those events and the theme that often stirred in the depths of his heart. He said, "The enormous suffering of peoples and individuals, even among my own friends and acquaintances, caused by Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, has never been far from my thoughts and prayers. I have often paused to reflect on the persistent question: How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence?"

What's the answer? Here it is: "My reasoned conviction," Pope John Paul speaking about what he had come to understand, "confirmed in turn by biblical revelation," by the word of God. So he's come to this conclusion out of his own reflections, but even more, out of the word of God. The conclusion is that "the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace?" if we want to restore the moral order, we want to bring peace into our world, we build it on these pillars, the pillar of

"justice and that special form of love we call forgiveness. Enemy love."

This is the heart of the message of Jesus and this is how we could transform the moral order, make it a world in which peace could prevail, if we really began to live according to this teaching, the way of justice, trying to make sure that the goods of the earth are distributed more justly, fairly, so that every person on this planet could have a full human life, which isn't true now. It is extraordinary injustice in our world. We have to begin to change that, but even more, we have to follow the way of Jesus, the way of forgiveness, or that special form of love we call enemy love. Don't just love those who love you; love your enemy.

So when it comes to conflict, we don't resolve it by returning violence for violence. We don't respond to hate with hate. We don't respond to evil with evil. We respond to violence with non-violence, to hatred with love, to evil with goodness. That's the way of Jesus. And we can't change the whole world at once, of course, but it will begin to be changed when every one of us who says "I follow Jesus Christ" begins to reject the way of violence, the way of hatred, the way of injustice.

When I begin to share what I have so that others may have what they need; when I begin to respond in my personal life to some act of hatred or some act of unkindness by responding with love; when I do that in my family; when I do that where I work; when I do that at school; when I do that in everyday life, then I begin to follow the way of Jesus and I begin to share his work of transforming our world. Then it will be a world where the reign of God fully happens, a world where there will be peace and every person will have a full human life.

Today, as you receive this sacrament of confirmation, you are being filled with the spirit of Jesus and God is saying to you, "You are my beloved, my chosen one, and in you I am well pleased." God will continue to say that to you if you commit yourself to follow the way of Jesus.

So in a few moments when I invite everyone to pray for the outpouring of the holy spirit upon these young people, and upon all of us, I urge you to pray with great fervor so that they, especially, but every one of us will be touched by that spirit of Jesus and will go back out into our everyday life to be different, to live differently, to live according to the way of Jesus, the way of forgiveness, the way of love. If we do that, we will be making the reign of God happen. We will be working to bring peace and justice into our world. We will be working to transform the shattered moral order into the way of God, the way of peace and love.

I urge you to pray fervently that God's spirit will fill all of us and that we go back out into our world ready to witness and live the way of Jesus.

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