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Confirmation helps lead the way to the kingdom of God

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 1, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Why we'd ask that question at this point -- because after all, you have really prepared over a long period of time for the Sacrament of Confirmation, so undoubtedly you're ready. Yet, it's important that I ask you: Do you want to be confirmed? Why? If you think about it, it's not just a ceremony that we're going through this morning. You could say, "Well, I want to be confirmed because everybody is prepared for it. We're going to have the ceremony, so I'll join in."
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You're not just saying yes to the ceremony. When you say, "I want to be confirmed," what are you saying yes to? Think about it. It's not just to a ceremony that will be over in a very short time. When you say, "I want to be confirmed" -- and all of us should think about this because we've been confirmed -- you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying, "Yes, I want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I want to follow Jesus and live according to His ways."

First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 9:8-15
Psalms 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15
Full text of the readings [1]

That's what you're saying yes to, and not just for this morning, but for the rest of your life, you're saying, "I want to follow Jesus Christ and be His disciple, part of the community of disciples that Jesus established on the earth when He was here." That will make a huge difference in your life if you take it very seriously. It's really a blessing that we have this Sacrament of Confirmation today with the readings that we had for this first Sunday of Lent, especially the Gospel reading.

That Gospel reading really lets us begin to understand what it means to follow Jesus, and we understand that a little bit better if we remember what happened just before the passage that we read for our Gospel today. Just before that, in the Gospel of Mark, Mark describes how Jesus was baptized, and when Jesus was baptized, it's described in the Scriptures. He went down into the River Jordan. John baptized Him. Then He came back out of the water and began to pray just within His own spirit.

While He was doing that, He experienced the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon Him. Jesus experienced that coming of the Holy Spirit that is going to happen in our sacrament today. The Spirit came upon Jesus and in the midst of that experience, Jesus heard God speaking to Him, "You are my Son, my beloved one. In You I am well pleased." That is what is happening to you today. God is sending His spirit upon you. If you listen deeply, you, too, will hear God saying, "You are my beloved, my chosen one, and in you I am well pleased."

God is affirming for you that He loves you without limit, without condition. You're very precious and very special. If you listen very carefully during this Sacrament and pray about this afterwards, you'll experience God pouring forth God's Spirit and God's love upon you. Then, as the Gospel went on today, we heard how Jesus was driven into the desert, and He spent six weeks -- this is what we're doing during this season of Lent -- six weeks of prayer, reflection and penance in order to understand what God is asking of us.

That's what Jesus was doing. Mark says today, "And He was tempted by the devil" because God was leading

Jesus in a special way and the devil was trying to get Him to go a different way. Jesus kept responding to the way God was leading Him, saying yes to God. After those six weeks, He comes back, and that's when He proclaims what we heard in the Gospel today: "The Reign of God is at hand."

The Reign of God is ready to break forth in our world. That means that if we really enter into the Reign of God, and it is at hand -- all we have to do is enter into it -- the Reign of God, which means that we respond to God's love in the world. Sometimes we use the phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven," and we think of a place. That isn't it. The Reign of God, the Kingdom of God is our relationship with God, our interacting with God, letting God's love be the way that guides our lives.

We've become a people around the persons embracing the love of God made present for us in Jesus. Every one of us can enter into that Reign of God, which is what will give us fullness of life, peace within our hearts deep within us, joy and life forever. That's the Reign of God, but here is the really important thing, the thing we have to pay careful attention to: "Change your lives." You see, you enter the Reign of God when you begin to live according to the way of Jesus.

How do we know about the way of Jesus? Well, we listen to the Scriptures. Every Sunday, we listen to the Gospel, where we hear Jesus speaking to us. We watch how Jesus acts, and He shows us how you live within the Reign of God. The last couple of Sundays, for example, we watched how Jesus had deep compassion and love for the sick. He went into the home of Peter, and Peter's mother-in-law was ill. The first thing He does is bless her and pray over her and heals her.

Then that night, if you remember the Gospel, people came from all around, and Jesus spent the whole night talking with each person, healing everyone who came to Him. He reaches out in love to those in need, whether it be physical need, financial need or whatever it is. Jesus is always reaching out in love. That's His way. Last Sunday, that leper was excluded from the community, forced to be outside isolated by himself. Jesus says, "No, you're welcome. Come in."

He touches him. He welcomes him, and that is the way Jesus is with anyone who feels excluded. He's always calling us into His love. He doesn't exclude anybody. That's the way of Jesus, and we need to be that way in our own lives, reaching out to people, whatever their need, sharing with them. That's what it means to be compassionate, sharing in their suffering or whatever it is that they're going through, reaching out, drawing in, welcoming everybody.

I could go on and name many things that show us how Jesus acted, how He lived and what He did, but the most challenging probably is how Jesus always loved everyone, and even His enemies. Jesus loved His enemies, and that's the most challenging thing that he urges upon us. Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you. Imagine if in our world, we gave up violence and hatred and stopped killing other people through wars.

If we really reached out in love within our neighborhoods and within our families, in our country and in the world, if we began to live the way of Jesus, how different our world would be. That's the challenge. Jesus says, "The Reign of God is at hand. Change your lives. Follow My way." A long time ago, Pope Paul VI wrote what we call the Peace Day Statement. We still do this. Every year, the Holy Father writes a statement for Jan. 1, the world day of prayer for peace in the world.

These statements have great teachings in them about how to bring peace into our hearts, into our lives and into our world. In 1976, when Paul VI wrote the one for that year, he was reflecting on what had happened during World War II, the terrible war that had ended back in 1945, but ended with the use of weapons of mass destruction that wiped out two whole cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Pope Paul was imploring how evil that was, a butchery of untold magnitude, he called it. You know what he wrote? He was saying, "What should be the way, if we're not going to use that kind of horror and violence?" He said, "Who is our model for this time when we have these kinds of weapons in the world?" The poor, weak man, Gandhi. Imagine that. The pope offered as our example a Hindu, because that Hindu had followed the way of Jesus, rejecting violence.

He led a nonviolent revolution. He overthrew the colonial power of Great Britain and freed India, not through violence but through love. That's the way of Jesus. If we are serious about the Sacrament of Confirmation, we will welcome the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us, and all of you young people today, I pray that you open your heart and your spirit to this coming of the Holy Spirit upon you, but the rest of us, too, should open our hearts now for a renewed coming of the Holy Spirit so that we can respond to what Jesus says to us in the Gospel.

"Change your lives. Begin to live according to My way, the way of love, the way of justice, the way of peace." That's how we will live this Sacrament of Confirmation. So all of us, I hope, will pray for our young people who are being confirmed today, and for ourselves, that we will respond and follow the way of Jesus. Change our lives, and we'll go back out into our world, ready to be witnesses to the way of Jesus, the way that will bring peace into our lives and into our world.

[Homily given at St. Sabina Parish, Dearborn Heights, 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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