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Love, not power or violence, is the way to the Reign of God

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 20, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

As we begin our reflection on this week's scriptures, I think it's important to remind ourselves that last week, Jesus, after performing an extraordinary miracle -- healing a person who was deaf and mute, and causing terrific amazement -- told the person who was cured and the disciples, "Don't tell anyone about this." This has come to be known as Jesus' attempt to keep the Messianic secret, that he was the Messiah.
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You hear him say that again to Peter and the disciples after Peter is saying, "You are the Messiah." Jesus says, "Keep it a secret." Last week, it was because he did not just want to be known as a wonder-worker, someone who just healed individual people. His task was to proclaim the good news, the Reign of God. Remember at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is described by Mark as proclaiming, "The Reign of God is at hand. Change your lives."

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 50:5-9a
Psalms 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9
James 2:14-18
Mark 8:27-35
Full text of the readings [1]

He had a mission, and he did not want that mission to be upset or counteracted by individual acts of wonders, miracles and healings of individuals, or even saving individuals. His goal was to proclaim the Reign of God. You may remember the first lesson last Sunday from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 35. It was a beautiful description of what the Reign of God is really to be.

> "Let the wilderness and the arid land rejoice, the desert be glad and blossom. Covered with blossoms, it sings and shouts with joy. Adorned with the splendor of Lebanon, the magnificence of Carmel and Sharon they, my people, see the glory of God, the majesty of God. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed. Then will the lame leap as a dear and the tongue of the mute sing and shout, for water will break out in the wilderness, streams gush forth from the desert. There will be a highway which will be called the way of holiness."

This is a beautiful description. Jesus says the Reign of God means the fullness of creation is achieved. There is life, vibrant life, for all of creation and for all humans. Everyone will share in this fullness of life, justice and peace. This is the Reign of God. This week -- it's important that I not repeat all of last week's homily, but it's just so important -- Jesus wanted to make sure his mission as Messiah was not obstructed in any way.

He was working for total transformation of our world to be the Reign of God, but there is a way that happens. That's what becomes so clear in today's scriptures, especially the Gospel. Peter identifies Jesus correctly: You are the Messiah. In the other Gospels, he is even said to add, "The son of the living God." Peter and the disciples knew who Jesus was, but Jesus said, "Don't tell anyone." He ordered them not to tell anyone about him, because not only was it so important that they begin to understand what his mission is, but also the way to that mission,

the way to achieve and accomplish it.

That's what Jesus begins to instruct them about in today's Gospel. He began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer many things be rejected by the elders and chief priests, and the teachers of the law. He would be killed, executed, in the most ignominious and tortuous way the people at the time could conceive of. Execution on a cross was a cruel, ignominious, dehumanizing, tortuous way to die, and they all knew it, but Jesus said that's what would have to happen.

It's a fulfillment, in a sense, in a very clear way, of our first lesson today, where we have what we call the third of the servant songs in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. "God has opened my ear, the servant," and Jesus takes these words to himself. "I have not rebelled, nor have I withdrawn. I offered my back to those who strike me, my cheeks to those who pulled my beard. Neither did I shield my face from blows, spittle and disgrace."

Jesus is showing us that he's willing to accept suffering rather than inflict suffering. It's a way of nonviolence, isn't it? We hear this. Jesus chose a way of nonviolence as an act of love, and he does it with confidence. "I have not despaired, for God comes to my help. So like a flint I set my face, knowing I will not be disgraced." We might add to this description of Jesus as the suffering servant where he accepts suffering, even to the point of being put to death rather than kill or inflict suffering.

If we go back to the first servant song, which we've heard before so many times, but it's so important. It is connected with Jesus' baptism. He hears God proclaiming him, "Here is my servant in whom I am well pleased." God allows Jesus to understand that he is the servant, and that's the first line of Chapter 42 of Isaiah, and Jesus would have known the rest of that passage. "My chosen one, in whom I delight, I have put my spirit upon him."

This is God speaking: "And he will bring justice to the nations." That's how he's going to make the Reign of God happen for all of creation, but how? He does not shout or raise his voice. He does not cry aloud in the streets. A broken reed he will not crush, nor will he snuff out the light of the wavering wick, and yet, he will bring justice in truth. We may not catch it immediately, but that's a beautiful description of act of love: rejecting violence.

Crying aloud in the streets is a call to arms. That's how they alerted the people that there was an attack. They had to call the militia to arms. Jesus does not shout or cry aloud in the streets. He will not allow that. Then the servant is described as nurturing and loving. He does not break the bruised reed. Rather gently, he strengthens it and brings it to life. He will not quench the wavering flame, the embers under the coals.

The servant gently breathes on them, blows on them, draws them into flame. You can't do that with power, might and violence of any kind. The servant is nurturing and loving. So Jesus is saying to the disciples, "This is the way that I will fulfill my mission."

We discover immediately that Peter and the others -- Peter specifically -- can't accept this. That's not the way you're going to establish a kingdom. You have to have power. You have to be like David, the great warrior king. So Peter protests strongly. In a sense, he says, "Look, we have all these people following us. We can change everything if we follow the way of power and might." And Jesus rebukes Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Satan means obstacle, and he says, "Get behind me. Be a disciple, a learner. Follow me." Jesus goes on to tell all the disciples and people, "If you want to follow me, take up your cross and follow me."

Take up this way of suffering, the way of acting in love. That's how you will join in the whole work of making the Reign of God happen. There is only one way. It's the way of love, not the way of power or violence.

As Pope Paul tells us in one of his peace day messages, "Violence is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Gospel. It is not the way of Jesus. It is not the way of the Catholic church. Only love is the way." Now are

we ready to hear this? I call your attention again to our first lesson today where, in that 50th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, the beginning of the lesson says, "God has taught me, so I speak as God's disciple. Morning after morning, God wakes me up to hear, to listen, like a disciple."

This is what we must do now, is to listen. Listen to Jesus, become a disciple, a learner. In our second lesson today, St. James makes it clear that we can't say we believe in Jesus, we follow Jesus only by a declaration. Brothers and sisters, what good is it to profess faith, to declare that you believe Jesus without showing works, without acting according to the way of Jesus? It's so clear, isn't it, but most of us are probably like Peter and the disciples. "How can this be?"

We're not the first disciples that had difficulty with these teachings of Jesus, the way of nonviolence, the way of love. When you look at Paul's first letter to the church of Corinth, you discover in the very first chapter that the people of Corinth must have been having trouble with the message of Jesus. Paul has to say to them in this letter, in a very clear way, "Here am I proclaiming the message of Jesus, the good news. Here am I proclaiming Christ crucified."

That's the good news, the Christ crucified. That doesn't seem to make sense, does it? That's what Paul says. He says, "I can't proclaim the message of Jesus with beautiful words. That would be like getting rid of the cross of Christ." He goes on to say, "The language of the cross, what Jesus is telling us, remains nonsense for those who are lost, yet for us who believe, the message of the cross is the power of God."

Further on in that first chapter, Paul says, "The Jews ask for miracles, the Greeks for higher knowledge, while we proclaim a crucified Christ." For the Jews who refused and still refuse to follow Jesus, a crucified Christ is a scandal. What a great scandal! The Son of God could be crucified? That's an obstacle. For many of those who refuse to accept Jesus, that was the downfall. It was a scandal, and for the Greeks who were so learned, it's foolishness, absolute foolishness.

That's what Paul says to the church in Corinth, but he's telling them, "For us who follow Jesus, the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." It's not a scandal. It's not foolishness. It's wisdom that goes beyond human wisdom, and it's a strength, the power of love, that goes beyond human power. This is the message of Jesus, the way to bring about change, to really transform our world so that it becomes the Reign of God, and to begin to live according to the Reign of God: rejecting power, violence and hatred, vengeance and all of those things in following Jesus.

I think more and more of us are aware of this, but we live at a time where there is so much violence in our world, in our civil society. Right now, I'm thinking of the violence of war, and just within the past week or 10 days, there is this threat from the prime minister of Israel, demanding that President Obama draw what he calls a red line, beyond which the people of Iran may not go in their attempt to develop nuclear weapons. If they go beyond that line, we must attack them and start a war.

He's trying to challenge the president, and it's a vulnerable time, during the election period. He's trying to challenge the president to follow into war, to declare that we will go to war, to put down an ultimatum. That's not the way to bring peace. In fact, it could open up a huge war because Iran is supported by Russia and China. So we might not just be attacking Iran. Who knows what will happen? Once war begins, all rationality, all love, all goodness is gone.

So we must stand up against this. The Reign of God will not happen, the fullness of peace, love, joy and life cannot come about if we continue to act according to the way of violence, the way of war. That's the challenge. This is a very specific and immediate incident that we have to confront. Are we going to confront it according to the way of Jesus, or will we confront it as we have so often in the past, with the way of violence, the way of war, trying to achieve our goals through overwhelming power and the destruction of life and so much else, in

this case, threatening all of creation if we ever got involved in the nuclear exchange?

I hope that as we listen to today's scriptures, we hear the message of Jesus: "If you want to be my disciple, you must take up your cross. You must follow me. Follow me in this way of love." How can we be converted to it? Paul was converted in an instant. He had this image of Jesus suddenly before him, and he understood who Jesus is, and that the message of Jesus is truly the message of God, and Paul was converted. We all remember his dramatic conversion. For most of us, it won't happen that way. It will happen over a period of time, reflection and prayer.

We must do what our first lesson calls upon us to do. At the beginning of that lesson, morning after morning, God wakes me up to hear, to listen. In our prayer, we must listen deeply to Jesus, to all of those who have gone before us who have followed the way of Jesus, and we must say no to violence, to hatred, to vengeance, and yes to love, the way of Jesus, the way of peace, the way that the Reign of God will burst forth in its fullness. Enter now into this Reign of God by listening deeply and following Jesus, following his way of love.

[Homily given at the Franciscan Center, Tampa Bay, Fla. 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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