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Compassion is key to a community of brothers and sisters

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 4, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

This passage of Luke's Gospel completes what we call in the scriptures the nativity narrative, the part of Luke's Gospel where he describes everything from the Annunciation to Mary and the visitation, and then the birth of Jesus and the visit of the kings, and so on. Now we're coming to a conclusion of the nativity narratives. This particular passage is, I think, a really good one to bring to a conclusion what we've been reflecting on through the season of Advent and preparation, and then last week we celebrated, remembered the birth of Jesus 2,000 years ago.

But I think often we do not really have a deep enough sense of the extraordinary thing that happened when Jesus was born into human history, became part of our human community, our human family. St. Paul in one of his letters, talks about Jesus as being son of God in power (this is after his resurrection), Jesus is son of God but also son of Mary. One like us in every way except sin; fully human in every way. This is the mystery of the incarnation -- Jesus, son of God, and yet one of us, fully human. And there's no crossover between his divinity and his humanity -- two completely separate ways of being, as one of us, but also son of God. It's a mystery that's beyond our comprehension, but it's a mystery that we begin to enter into when we try to reflect deeply on this reality: God coming into our world, into our history, becoming part of the human race.

Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14
Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5
Colossians 3:12-21
Luke 2:41-52

Full text of the readings [1]

When the first disciples (like Paul again, for example), were confronted with this mystery, remember Paul started out as a Pharisee who was trying to stop the Christian movement. He was persecuting Christians. Then he had this vision of Jesus risen, and Paul was thrown to the ground; he was stunned, and it totally changed his life when he realized this Jesus, whom he was persecuting and his followers, was in fact the son of God. It just overwhelmed him, changed his whole life, and that is what happens to any of us if we really begin to try to grapple with this truth, that God came into our world -- God, the one who is beyond all human history, who is transcendent, who is the source of all being -- this God becomes one of us. It's a mystery that we need to try to ponder very deeply.

And today's Gospel lesson shows us, in a sense, both sides of the mystery. The parents of Jesus are on their yearly trip to Jerusalem, and this time they take Jesus with them; he's 12 years old. Then Jesus stays behind. They traveled in groups of families and relatives and so on, so Mary and Joseph at first weren't concerned -- he's probably with family and friends in another part of the group. But at the end of the day, they look for him and he's not there. Many of you are parents, and I can imagine you can think of what that would mean. Your child is gone, no idea where he is. It would really cause you deep concern and confusion. So they hurried back, and they find Jesus.

Here's where the story changes, but we need to remember that St. Luke, this Gospel, was put together about 40 or 50 years after Jesus had been born. It was around the year 80 or in the mid-80s that the Gospel was put together, so by this time, the community had a deeper sense of who Jesus was. So Luke puts into the Gospel Jesus acting as son of God. "Did you not know I had to be in my father's house, beginning to carry on my mission?" Luke could put that in there because by that time the community, those who followed Jesus, knew he was son of God and understood that he would be about his father's business, his father's work. Mary and Joseph

didn't know that at the time, and that's why they were puzzled; they couldn't understand the words.

But as Luke tells us, Mary pondered all these things in her heart and tried to come to terms and begin to grasp who this child of hers really was. This is what we have to try to do, try to come to a deep understanding that Jesus is one like us in every way, so we can relate and he can relate to us. He can enter into our difficulties, into our happy experiences, into our sorrows and losses. Jesus is like us, he understands us, but he's also son of God. So I think this then makes very important something that Jesus says during his public life: "I am the way, the truth and the life." He's one of us, but he's also son of God, so he comes into this world to reveal to us who God really is and to show us how to follow the way of God, how to become the full human persons we are called to be. We have to listen to the words of Jesus and follow his example, watch how he acts.

Our first two lessons today provide us instruction, first from a passage of the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus would have known, would have read, would have prayed over, a reflection on the Fourth Commandment about honoring your father and your mother. In the passage, the writer makes very clear that especially as your parents become older (and we are experiencing this more and more in our society now), it can be a burden to try to care for your parents, and yet we're obliged and obligated to do this according to God's word. But in the letter of Paul to the church at Colossae, it's even more clear how we are to act as followers of Jesus if we listen to him who is one like us.

Paul tells the Christians at Colossae and says this to us: "Clothe yourselves then as is fitting for God's chosen people, people who are holy and beloved of God." Here's what we need to do -- put on compassion. Compassion. This means entering into the experience of others. Don't just be concerned about me and myself and my experiences, but be aware of other people. This means within our families to really be thoughtful of one another, but also in our parish family. Paul was writing to a Christian community where there was a lot of turmoil and a lot of fighting back and forth, and he was telling them, You have to be compassionate, be kind, humility, meekness, patience, all of these things. So in our own families, we need to practice these virtues, in our parish family but also I would say in our larger community, too.

Should we really be satisfied with a community of our brothers and sisters -- not necessarily within our parish family, our personal family, but our whole community -- satisfied when there's this kind of spirit of individualism and a lack of understanding of the common good? We're all aware, I'm sure, that in our Congress right now there's this big struggle -- how are we going to be sure that our resources are used for the benefit of all? That's what God is calling us to, not just me, for me and myself, but our resources are for the common good.

So we need to listen carefully and try to follow this word that Paul is proclaiming, that is built on what Jesus did and said, "As God is forgiving you, forgive one another. Above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony." So we have to find the ways that in our personal, daily lives we put on this way of Jesus. Follow it, because he's son of God and he knows the way. He is the way. But he's also one of us. He understands how difficult it is for us, but he's there to encourage us by his example and by his words. So if we will listen to him and really accept that this is God speaking to us, but one like us who can show us how to do it in our human situation, then what Paul says will become true for each of us: "The word of God will dwell in you in all its richness." So with thankful hearts, you can sing to God psalms and hymns and spontaneously pray so whatever you do giving thanks to God, you do it in the name of Jesus, and then finally, the peace of Christ will overflow in your hearts, and so for this, we can be thankful.

[Homily given at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, 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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